

NEGATIVE SPACES: BRITISH WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS AND THE STAGING  
OF ABSENCE, 1770-1830

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This project focuses on women playwrights of the English Romantic period. It argues that they engaged powerfully with a breadth of issues in ways inflected and informed by their gender in order to rewrite inherited narratives of politics, culture, economics, history, and philosophy. Its central claim is that these women fundamentally reworked the concept of absence, transforming it from one of lack to a way of displaying the silences, subjugations, and sacrifices of women in English culture at large. By examining these writers, contemporary scholars can uncover new methods of resistance to forms of broad cultural oppression that continue to persist today. Ultimately, the goal of the dissertation is to contribute to the larger social project of recovering historically marginalized voices in order to better appreciate their contributions to contemporary society.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

John Edward Robbins was born on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. He attended Swarthmore College and Oxford University, and briefly taught mathematics before coming to Cornell.

This project is dedicated to my parents, Nancy and Merritt Robbins, without whose  
unwavering love and support it would not have been possible.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Biographical Sketch . . . . .	iii
Dedication . . . . .	iv
Acknowledgments . . . . .	v
Introduction: <i>An Unattainable Substance</i> . . . . .	vii
Chapter One: <i>History in the Closet: Hannah Cowley's The Fate of Sparta and Felicia Hemans' The Siege of Valencia</i> . . . . .	xlii
Chapter Two: <i>Smiling with Baillie: Physiognomy and Gesture in De Monfort</i> . . . . .	lxxxii
Chapter Three: <i>The Order of the Day: Terror and Terrorism in Elizabeth Inchbald's The Massacre</i> . . . . .	cxiii
Chapter Four: <i>"A modest virgin hath no choice": Joanna Baillie's The Bride and the Staging of Foreclosure</i> . . . . .	cli
Coda: <i>A Whisper of Soft Winds</i> . . . . .	clxxx
Bibliography . . . . .	clxxxv

## Introduction: An Unattainable Substance

Not, Silence, for thine idleness I raise  
My silence-bounded singing in thy praise,  
But, for thy moulding of my Mozart's tune,  
Thy hold upon the bird that sings the moon,  
Thy magisterial ways.

– Alice Meynell, “To Silence”<sup>1</sup>

What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.

– Ludwig Wittgenstein, *final proposition of Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*<sup>2</sup>

In the years between 1770 and 1830, women playwrights in England enjoyed a virtually unprecedented degree of social and literary success. For the first time in European history, these women could support themselves and their families entirely by writing plays, and their works in turn exercised significant influence over the views of the inhabitants of London and the surrounding area, arguably the commercial and cultural capital of the world at that time.<sup>3</sup> Women who wrote plays intervened within contemporary philosophical debates, functioned as bell-wethers for major cultural movements such as suffrage and the codification of gender norms, and even swayed economic and political policy; all told, some of their plays were seen by many

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Meynell, “To Silence,” in *The Poems of Alice Meynell, Complete Edition*, ed. Wilfred Meynell (New York: Kessinger Publishing, 2005). 132.

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1961). 151.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Mellor, for example, has argued that “women writers had an enormous – and hitherto largely uncredited – impact on the formation of public opinion in England between 1780 and 1830... I see the values of the private sphere associated primarily with women – moral virtue and an ethic of care – infiltrating and finally dominating the discursive public sphere during the Romantic era” (Anne Mellor, *Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England, 1780-1830* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000). 11).



thousands of people, including the most prominent citizens and legislators of London.<sup>4</sup> Yet while these playwrights were attaining this elevated status, they were simultaneously some of the most marginalized figures in Romantic society: they were frequently compared to prostitutes in contemporary newspapers and theatrical reviews because of their perceived desire to place their “wares” on display before a paying audience, and were consequently shunned by much polite society; they were financially under the thumbs of male theater managers who controlled when, where, and how often their works would be staged – crucial components of economic success in the Romantic theater. Although a few experienced financial success and independence to a degree that would have been almost unimaginable even fifty years earlier, the vast majority labored unsuccessfully, unable to even get their plays an initial reading. A predominantly male theatrical establishment worked diligently to prevent too many women from entering its ranks at all levels, but especially as playwrights; those women who successfully established themselves as viable writers were the exception, not the rule, and their presence often served to reinforce the general perception that only a tiny minority of women were able to write works worthy of the stage.<sup>5</sup> With increased visibility and opportunities for Romantic women writers also came new systems of silencing and containment to delimit them: censorship laws which favored established male playwrights; social stigmas attached to female writing in general and play-writing in particular; and economic incentives against theaters risking productions by untested dramatists, which constituted the

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<sup>4</sup> This assertion is based on the ability of the major playhouses such as Drury Lane and Covent Garden to hold upwards of 3,600 spectators from diverse backgrounds in a single evening, and the extremely long run, across many nights and often several seasons, of the most successful works by women from the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

majority of women. A period of the greatest influence for a few was paradoxically also one of the most repressive for women writers as a whole, of continued exclusion masked behind outward success.

This dissertation argues that as a response to this paradox, women playwrights of the Romantic period turned to the concept of absence, extending its already-established eighteenth-century use by applying it to the stage. It asserts that Romantic women playwrights did not view absence as an inability to perform, but instead used it as a tool to comment on the social and political climate in which they were writing. They employed absence as a way of bringing into focus the silences, subjugations, and sacrifices of women, both on the stage and in English Romantic culture at large. This project argues that within their plays these figures created what I will term “negative spaces,” in which they conspicuously staged the removal or absence of a variety of textual elements in order to demonstrate the inability of traditional dramatic forms to give voice to their concerns, and to shed light on social, economic, and political issues that would otherwise have remained invisible. Each of the four chapters that follows examines how women writers employed these “negative spaces” to stand for both symptom and mode of resistance across realms such as history, the body, science, and gender roles; focusing on their manipulation of these negative spaces offers a way of understanding both their constraints and their modes of recuperation.

The absence this project describes primarily takes two forms, illustrated by the above quotes by Meynell and Wittgenstein: it gives shape to that which it surrounds, defining by contrast that which is “present” or material; and it serves to draw attention to the unspeakable, to generate recognition of that which cannot be articulated in a

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Ellen Donkin, *Getting into the Act: Women Playwrights in London, 1776-1830* (London:

way that is otherwise impossible. Both of these definitions are at play in the chapters which follow; the ability of absence to perform both functions simultaneously is part of what made it so compelling to Romantic women playwrights.

Although at first blush we might view absence as antithetical to the production of meaning, the lack or passive negation of existence in the material world (whether that is defined physically, as objects with substance, or metaphysically, as ideas, theories, or philosophical concepts), it need not necessarily take on this definition. Instead, we might understand it as serving a positive function: of working in conjunction with presence to generate meaning. Just as the Alice Meynell poem quoted above acknowledges that her singing is “silence-bounded,” so each text exists only insofar as it differentiates itself from that which surrounds it: both structuralist and post-structuralist thought insist, for example, that discrete units such as linguistic phonemes or musical notes only have meaning insofar as they are differentiated from other potential combinations of sounds or movements – as well as the gaps which distinguish them from that which comes before or after. The term “light,” for example, has no value if it is not juxtaposed with “darkness;” the same holds true for all positive/negative binaries, such as sound/silence, movement/stillness, and full/empty. While we may study a play as a performed text, then, we cannot do so without taking into consideration the moments which it proceeds or follows – it is the rise of the curtain before, and its fall after, that bounds the play, differentiating it from the experience of everyday life and lending it its substance. In this way, absence, in a sense, underwrites all presence; they are two sides to the same coin, which could not exist without one another.

Yet the co-formation in which absence participates also bears within it the trace of that formation; within every act of production of a play, reading of a novel, or recitation of a poem, there is the specter of what has been forcibly excluded (or occluded) from its creation and manifestation. Tracing the removal of these elements allows us to reveal those features of the text that bear witness to aspects such as social or cultural exclusion, racial subjugation, or political suppression; aspects that are often (seemingly) effaced from the text itself. A familiar example lies in translation: when the Romantic playwright Elizabeth Inchbald translated plays by August von Kotzebue from German to English, she frequently altered some elements of the source text greatly, and omitted others entirely. In this case, it is often a simple matter to retrieve the original German play, compare the source text with Inchbald's translation to identify the missing or altered elements, and then form hypotheses as to why these may have been left out or changed. However, the kinds of texts this project is interested in treating – and the kind of reading hermeneutics it advocates – cannot be approached so simply; it is as though we are attempting to uncover those elements that have been left out, but without a source text to use as a point of comparison. Doing so requires a non-traditional approach: since it is impossible to directly view or interact with what is, strictly speaking, absent, any engagement with it must necessarily be peripheral or indirect.<sup>6</sup> We must carefully examine those points at which the text bears the traces of removal (whether physically, as in an edited manuscript, or structurally, as with the omission of a significant political or social event in an expected context), and remain attuned to the multitude of ways in which such manifestations may occur. What I wish to discuss may therefore more correctly be

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<sup>6</sup> Such peripheral engagement recalls the story of Medusa, whom Perseus slays by looking at through

termed “absenting” than absence: since we cannot see absence directly, but only its trace, we must examine the process of its removal in order to understand it. So, for example, attending to the material text of a play like Joanna Baillie’s *The Bride* (1828) presents us with a colonial drama with a thinly veiled proselytization narrative; however, reading the play in light of Romantic censorship laws, the fraught status of women in the Romantic theater and publishing industries, and the position of women in Romantic society as a whole, as I do in this project’s final chapter, reveals those social and political elements which have been pushed out of the text, and which only exist within it now in the form of the conspicuous void that they create. In attempting to understand those “absent” elements of a text, we can only study their reverberations, or echoes, rather than the source itself directly, which has been occluded.

Absence in this positive form is therefore related to Edmund Burke’s conception of the sublime. After describing terror as “the common stock of everything that is sublime,” Burke asserts that “All *general* privations are... terrible; *vacuity, darkness, solitude, and silence*,” each is capable of causing the viewer or participant to become unmoored, unable to encompass or delimit the scope of what is before him or her, and thus each leads to a terror that nevertheless generates a feeling of awe and sublimity.<sup>7</sup> He goes on to argue that

if the pain and terror [of the sublime] are so modified as not to be actually noxious; if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person, as these emotions clear the parts, whether fine or gross, of a dangerous and troublesome incumbrance, they are capable of producing delight; not

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the mirrored shield provided by Athena.

<sup>7</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1762). 48 and 50; emphases in original.

pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror.<sup>8</sup>

Paradoxically, it is the simultaneous presence and absence of the sublime object together that produces delight: if the object is actually experienced as a threat, encountering it is merely paralyzing and horrible, leaving the subject in a state of mental breakdown;<sup>9</sup> it is only in being away from the object, in retaining the ability to view it while preserving one's safety, that the individual is able to experience this "delight." Burke rigidly separates this feeling of delight from what he terms "*positive* pleasure,"<sup>10</sup> which is within the scope of the beautiful; if the sublime and beautiful are opposed, then, it follows that this pleasure which is produced by the sublime might rightly be termed "negative."

The second quality of absence which this project articulates is encapsulated within Wittgenstein's conclusion to the *Tractatus*, which presents the possibility of absence having, paradoxically, a generative capacity, what Leslie Kane calls "the multidimensional, nonverbal expression of silence."<sup>11</sup> Rather than framing absence only as a void that is evacuated of meaning or the lack of substance, we can therefore also view it as a force capable of altering that which is around it precisely *because* of these characteristics. Like a black hole that produces no light, but draws that which surrounds it into itself, absence can exert a form of gravitational pull, radically changing the landscape around it. Kane notes the capacity of silence to convey depths

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 129.

<sup>9</sup> "In this case [being confronted by the sublime object] the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it" (41-42).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 127; emphasis mine.

<sup>11</sup> Leslie Kane, *The Language of Silence: On the Unspoken and the Unspeakable in Modern Drama* (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1984). 13. It is important to note here that while I recognize that "silence," "absence," and "negative space" are distinct terms with significant variations between them, this study will view them as engaged in a dialogue with one another that productively contributes to our understanding of negation and absence as a whole, and will therefore draw from current theorizations of each.

of experience for which traditional language proves inadequate:

Thus speech, the characterizing signature of humanity, has been superseded by silence to communicate unspoken experience beyond the limitations of human consciousness, such as fear, longing, and death, as well as unspeakable experience beyond the comprehension of humanity such as the dehumanizing or bestial... the muzzled silence of outrage, the expectant silence of waiting, the reproachful silence of censure, the tacit silence of approval, the vituperative silence of accusation, the eloquent silence of awe, the unnerving silence of menace, the peaceful silence of communion, and the irrevocable silence of death illustrate by their unspoken response to speech that experiences exist for which we lack the word.<sup>12</sup>

By giving voice to these experiences, absence paradoxically enables representation itself. Conspicuously absent literary elements contain the potential to make readers attend all the more strongly to precisely those points at which they perceive gaps or moments of erasure. This status, paradoxically, presents such texts with the opportunity to “place” figures or concepts before the public eye which would otherwise be invisible or utterly silenced, such as moments of trauma or social critique.<sup>13</sup> While a play such as Joanna Baillie’s *The Bride*, therefore, bears within itself the evidence of its forced removal from the English stage, this project argues that it simultaneously uses this “scarring” to highlight the fraught position of women in the Romantic theater. Bringing to attention the absent elements within a text allows a writer to precisely delineate and draw into focus to the boundaries of what may be expressed; to articulate which elements may be spoken about, and which must be, as Wittgenstein suggests, “pass[ed] over in silence.” The gaps or fissures within a text are precisely those points which can shine light upon elements which cannot be

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<sup>12</sup> *The Language of Silence*, 13.

<sup>13</sup> This is not to assert, of course, that all texts contain all “absent” figures within them at all times; doing so would be akin to claiming absurdly that because no elephants are mentioned in *Hamlet*, the play must be about them indirectly. Instead, I am arguing that some works, especially dramas by

otherwise shown, such as governmental censorship. For example, Thomas Crochunis has described how Elizabeth Inchbald's *The Massacre* (1792), the subject of this project's third chapter, "exerted all the more pressure on readers... because the unlikelihood of its being staged or published in its era raised questions about what kinds of political discourses surrounding gender and revolution were possible."<sup>14</sup> Strictly speaking, such absence exists only within the mind of the observer; it cannot be created, only *imagined*. It therefore represents a site of representational and imaginative potentiality, in which the subject can populate this space with whatever he or she desires.

To better understand absence in this form we can relate it to the methodology of apophatic theology, which posits that God, because of His perfection, is unable to be described in positive terms, since these are necessarily inadequate; therefore, He can only be defined by what He is not. Apophatic theology thus employs negative attributes as a way of approximating a description of God: for example, He is not bounded in space and time; He is unlimited in His power; He is beyond comprehension; He is beyond linguistic description. The goal of these non-descriptions is not to describe the deity directly, but to draw attention to the inability of language to provide adequate understandings of God, leading the believer to the realization that God is above and beyond all language, and that true knowledge can only come through the *via negativa*. Negative language here takes on a generative value; it becomes the sole venue by which that which is inherently indescribable may,

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women of the Romantic period, conspicuously foreground the absence of certain specific elements from their text for the purpose of making their reader aware of the textual caesura that their lack creates.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Crochunis, "Pre- and Postrealist Dramaturgy: Women Writers, Silence, Speech, and Trauma" in *Teaching British Women Playwrights of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century*, ed.



paradoxically, be accounted for.

Recent theorizations of absence in art and visual theory also shed light on this generative feature of absence. Theorists in this field describe “negative space” as the area that exists around or between the object or objects in an image. It stands in contrast to the “positive space” occupied by those objects that initially attract the viewer’s attention: so, for example, in a traditional portrait, the individual shown occupies the positive space, while the space behind him or her is termed the negative space. Nevertheless, negative space is necessary to define the area around the image; without this surrounding space, the concept of “image” itself would have no meaning, as there would be no differentiation between its different components. Rather than representing a lack, negative space actually provides definition, and is the condition of possibility for representation itself. As Alan Fletcher notes, “Space is substance. Cézanne painted and modeled space. Giacometti sculpted by ‘*taking the fat off space*’. Mallarmé conceived poems with absences as well as words. Ralph Richardson asserted that acting lay in pauses... Isaac Stern described music as ‘*that little bit between each note – silences which give the form.*’”<sup>15</sup>

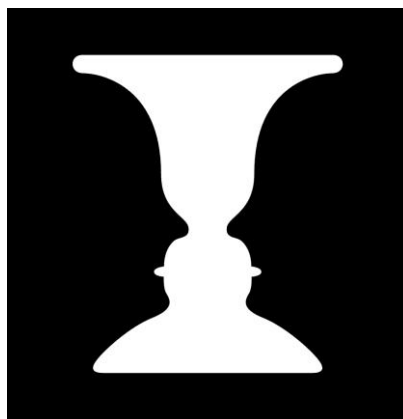
At the same time, visual theory has shown how foreground and background can often intrude upon one another, blending together and blurring the lines that would seem to separate the two.<sup>16</sup> Consider, for example, the famous Rubin’s Vase image:<sup>17</sup>

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Bonnie Nelson and Catherine Burroughs (New York: Modern Language Association, 2010). 336-347. 343.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Fletcher, *The Art of Looking Sideways* (London: Phaidon Press, 2001). 370; emphases in original. See also Yve-Alain Bois’ *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990) and chapter four of Thomas Puttfarcken’s *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition: Theories of Visual Order in Painting, 1400-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Richard Schiff’s essay “Constructing Physicality” in *Art Journal*, 50:1 (Spring 1991), 42-47, esp. 44. One of the undercurrents of this dissertation is that in the same way, by conspicuously drawing their position as “background” elements into focus, women playwrights were able to become a part of the Romantic theater’s foreground.



(Figure 1)

The image produces what is known as the “figure-ground effect,” a phenomenon in which the observer is unable to distinguish whether the faces are the image and the vase is the background, or vice-versa. Furthermore, it is nearly impossible for a viewer to perceive both of these objects at once: most individuals vacillate repeatedly between seeing the vase and seeing the faces, their vision alternating back and forth as their eyes attempt to reconcile the duality. However, each of the following propositions is equally true: that the image depicts a vase (defining the vase as the positive space and the faces as the negative space); that the image depicts two faces (defining the faces as the positive space and the vase as the negative space); and that the image depicts both a vase and two faces at the same time, even if we cannot perceive them simultaneously. In this image, then, what is “absent” in one sense is shown, paradoxically, to have a shape with which it coexists. Such an example illustrates the difficulty of attempting to firmly demarcate presence from absence: the two terms alternate repeatedly, even coming to overlap at points, in ways that are not wholly reconcilable with our visual and cognitive capabilities. Indeed, in order to

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<sup>17</sup> Image taken from *The Dictionary of Optometry and Visual Science*, ed. Michael Millodot, entry for “Rubin’s Vase,” 7<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2008).

adequately comprehend the scope of the image, one must turn outside of the visual realm, to language, to describe what is going on; relying on vision alone fails us. Focusing on negative space in an image like the Rubin's Vase urges attention to the relationship between that which we would ordinarily perceive as "present" and that which we term "absent," and draws into question the stability of these terms.<sup>18</sup> It emphasizes the relationality between these terms, the degree to which presence and absence co-exist and are interrelated, and are mutually constitutive of one another. That which is supposedly devoid of meaning becomes interchangeable with the space of the so-called positive "image," demonstrating the instability of these distinctions and imbuing what had been considered "absent" with a form and shape of its own, along with a capacity for itself generating figuration.

The idea that absence is paradoxically able to exert power by its very insubstantiality is not new to modern visual theorists, however, having been well-established since the Restoration and early eighteenth century in fields ranging from poetic discourse and literary criticism, to artistic representation, and even in medical and scientific texts. Henry Fielding describes the subject at length in his delightfully witty "Essay on Nothing" (1743), in which he lambasts the airs of contemporary society by (half) facetiously declaring that "Nothing contains so much dignity as Nothing... the world came from Nothing... Nothing is the end as well as the beginning of all things."<sup>19</sup> In one remarkable trajectory, the Earl of Rochester, Alexander Pope, and Samuel Johnson all take up the theme of absence, identified

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<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this conceptual blending, see Jeroen Stumpel's essay "On Grounds and Backgrounds: Some Remarks about Composition in Renaissance Painting" in *Simiolus*, 18:4 (1988), 219-243.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Fielding, "An Essay on Nothing" in *Miscellanies* (London: A. Millar, 1833). 240, 244, and 243.

variously as nothingness or silence.<sup>20</sup> Rochester's 1679 poem "Upon Nothing" presents "Nothing" as the originary force out of which all "Things" arose, existing even before time, substance, and place: "Ere Time and Place were, Time and Place were not, / When primitive Nothing something straight begot."<sup>21</sup> "Nothing" for the poet is actually the groundwork upon which all that exists rests and from whence it arises; although humans and animals have the capacity for generation and self-reproduction, they are all merely imitative of Nothing's originary creation. The poet goes on to describe how Nothing was betrayed by its creation "Something," which "from fruitful Emptiness's Hand / Snatch'd Men, Beasts, Birds, Fire, Air, and Land... With Form and Matter, Time and Place did join; / Body, thy Foe, with thee did Leagues combine / To spoil thy peaceful Realm, and ruin all thy Line."<sup>22</sup> Nothing is assisted in its reclamation only by Time, which draws all in existence back toward the state of nothingness from which it originally arose. Alexander Pope picked up Rochester's theme, explicitly signaling his imitation of the earlier poet in his "Earl of Rochester: On Silence" (1712). Pope's poem describes Silence in terms nearly identical to Rochester's Nothing: it existed before all else, is the rightful place of fool and wit alike, and now allies itself with other forces of decay. Yet Pope's Silence lacks Nothing's agency: instead of actively generating Something, as in Rochester's formulation,<sup>23</sup> Silence is overthrown by forces that spring of their own accord, *ex nihilo*:

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<sup>20</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this sequence, and of the history of discussions of silence and nothingness in poetry from the Renaissance to the beginning of the eighteenth century, see Paul Baines, "From 'Nothing' to 'Silence': Rochester and Pope" in *Reading Rochester*, ed. Edward Burns (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995). 137-165.

<sup>21</sup> John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, *The Works of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, ed. Harold Love (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). 46; lines 4-5.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 46 and 47; lines 11-12 and 16-18.

Thine was the sway ere Heav'n was form'd, or earth,  
Ere fruitful thought conceiv'd Creation's birth,  
Or midwife word gave aid, and spoke the infant forth.

Then various elements against thee join'd,  
In one more various animal combin'd,  
And framed the clam'rous race of busy humankind.<sup>24</sup>

By 1779, however, Samuel Johnson had returned to absence the agency it had possessed for Rochester. His gloss of Rochester's poem in *The Lives of the English Poets* takes into consideration Pope's portrayal, but insists, "in examining this performance, 'Nothing' must be considered as having not only a negative but a kind of positive signification; as I need not fear thieves, I have *nothing*, and *nothing* is a very powerful protector. In the first part of the sentence it is taken negatively, in the second it is taken positively, as an agent."<sup>25</sup> Johnson emphasizes that Nothing is both positive and negative: it is simultaneously a declaration of lack, and an assertion that this lack can have very real material consequences (e.g. preventing robbery). As a structure which is capable of having a "positive signification" that generates meaning, Johnson's definition of absence as containing two natures within itself is ultimately one which Romantic playwrights would come to employ as well.

The eighteenth-century scientific and artistic communities similarly shared an interest in the power of absence or voids. Experiments in vacuums abounded, for example, as did representations of these in art. As early as 1659, Robert Boyle had begun conducting experiments in which he suffocated birds or other small animals by placing them in a vacuum and depriving them of oxygen with an air pump. Although

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<sup>23</sup> "Primitive Nothing something straight begot" (line 5); note also the biblical resonance of "begot," which equates Nothing with God in the originary act of creation.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander Pope, "Earl of Rochester: On Silence" in *The British Poets*, vol. 2 (London: C. Whittingham, 1822). 210; lines 4-9.

initially the purview of a select few wealthy scientists, by the middle of the eighteenth century such experiments had become commonplace, and were often performed for large paying audiences in major metropolitan centers, and even in smaller provinces by wandering showmen, thus giving them wide exposure among the public.<sup>26</sup> This procedure is famously captured in Joseph Wright of Derby's 1768 *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*:



(Figure 2; used with permission of the National Gallery Picture Library)

Deprivation is the painting's central focus: it is not even air itself, the most insubstantial of elements, which is causing the creature's death, but its *lack*. The

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<sup>25</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the English Poets* (London: Jones and Company, 1825). 60; emphases in original.

<sup>26</sup> Judy Egerton, *The British Paintings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). 337-338. See also Paul Elliott, "The Birth of Public Science in the English Provinces: Natural Philosophy in Derby, c. 1690-1760" in *Annals of Science*, 57:1 (January 2000), 61-100.

entire setting is framed in darkness except for one central, sourceless light, creating the effect of an encroaching blackness, an extinguishing of energy that mirrors the gradual death of the cockatoo in the vacuum. Because the scientist is looking out of the painting, at the viewer, he or she begins in a way to become him- or herself the subject of the experiment, that which is succumbing to the effects of deprivation, of the absence of air, before which the image of the room is quickly fading. The void around which the experiment takes place is ultimately a constitutive element of the painting as a whole, an intrinsic aspect of its construction.

This project asserts that Romantic women playwrights picked up on this preexisting trajectory and altered it by translating absence as it had been understood in these diverse realms to the English stage. The dual nature of absence, as potentially both constructive and generative, made it the ideal medium for these figures to comment on social and political issues which belied conventional representation. Constructing negative spaces in which they could play out and foreground subjects that otherwise evaded direct depiction before a reading or viewing public allowed Romantic women writers to respond in a variety of ways to newly emerging issues such as dramatic censorship, the French Revolution and the threat (or hope) of its spread to England, the economic exclusion of women, and challenges to established gender norms among writers. These playwrights began employing negative spaces on a large scale during this period because conventional representation so often proven inadequate to address these issues. Women of the Romantic period were especially interested in appropriating and applying these conceptions of absence to the stage, as they offered the possibility of expressing a voice in areas in which they were often denied one entirely. Drama emerged as the site in which these figures shaped the

“negative spaces” I am describing, since, as it has been traditionally viewed as the most material of genres, it offered the possibility of foregrounding a body onstage, or of staging the conspicuous removal of a body from the public eye; this gesture was particularly powerful when it was a *female* body being displaced in this way.<sup>27</sup>

It is important to note that this project is not arguing that Romantic women playwrights were the first figures to use absence this way on the stage: just as a trajectory of treating absence as containing a generative potential had been well-established since the Restoration, this approach can certainly be found in works by earlier playwrights as well. Like Romantic playwrights, women writing for the stage throughout the Restoration and the early eighteenth century found absence a particularly fertile site for exploration. As early as Aphra Behn’s 1677 play *The Rover*, for example, we find the powerlessness of female characters conspicuously put on display: Angelica and Hellena are both subject to potential social ruination by the (roguish, yet also having real consequence) machinations of Willmore, who insists on enjoying the pleasures of sex without being bound to the social and economic obligations of marriage, and Florinda is threatened with gang rape at the hands of Blunt and Frederick simply because she is a woman in the wrong place at the wrong time. I am not contesting a rigid trajectory, or that there is an *absence of genealogy* for negative spaces during the eighteenth century; rather, earlier writers like Behn allow us to track instead the *genealogy of absence* during this time. While women had been using different techniques for modes of resistance throughout the history of their

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<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting, for example, that the term *obscene*, denoting that which is too vile to be shown or discussed publicly, comes from the Latin root *obscaena*, literally “off-stage,” indicating the close relationship between censorship, social control, and the stage as a medium for enforcing them (“obscene, *adj.*” *OED Online*. December 2011. Oxford University Press).



writing drama, I am arguing that during the Romantic period this engagement became *consolidated* into the manipulation and appropriation of absence. Women playwrights of the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries began to foreground this concept and feature it much more centrally in their works in a way that it had not been before, and it became their primary mode of engagement with their readers and audiences and with contemporary issues of culture, history, and politics. The history of Romantic drama by women is firmly situated within a lineage of ideas drawing from a diverse set of scientific, poetic, and critical discourses, notably including earlier dramas.

Additionally, this project is not asserting that these writers were self-consciously generating what we might call a “theory of absence,” collaborating together to form it, or even referring to their own works in these terms.<sup>28</sup> They did not use the term themselves, or explicitly articulate that they viewed their individual writings as contributing to a larger discourse on the subject. Nor did every female playwright use absence in this way: it is easy to find numerous counterexamples in the canon of Romantic plays by women. However, this way of constructing meaning is foregrounded in many of the works of the most prominent female playwrights of the period. The term “absence” is therefore one that I am retroactively using as a tool for talking about a larger pattern based on a framework compiled from the works of contemporary theorists from a variety of disciplines and from the plays themselves. I use understandings of “absence” and “negative space” as a way to retroactively describe (although I hope not *ascribe*) the movement from a positive to a negative

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<http://www.oed.com.proxy.library.cornell.edu/view/Entry/129823#eid34113151> (accessed March 15, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Ellen Donkin has noted the striking lack of community among these playwrights during the years between 1776 and 1830 as one of their primary hindrances from greater social and economic advancement.

framework of representationality which was taking place in this period as a response to the cultural, social, economic, and political factors on which this study focuses.

In adopting a “negative” approach to these playwrights, this project goes against the grain of the traditional narrative of Romantic drama by women, which has presented these figures in largely “positive” terms. Starting in the 1970’s, criticism of Romantic drama has followed a track of roughly linear progression. Articles and books from this period usually operated under the assumption that drama from the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was simply “bad” or “mental theater” that was not worthy of the stage, and even then only examined plays written by canonical male poets, largely omitting women and professional playwrights from serious consideration. The result was a privileging of poetry, especially the lyric, as the preferred genre of analysis. The late 1980’s and early 1990’s saw an emergence of critics such as Gregory Kucich, Jeffrey Cox, and Alan Richardson who began to question these inherited assumptions. Examining the cultural apparatus of the theater and its contemporary cultural moment, they argued that Romantic drama was actually worth serious engagement: it was simply that dramatists, especially the canonical male poets, abandoned (or attempted to bypass entirely) the theater because it wasn’t a fit medium for the subjects they wanted to convey.<sup>29</sup> Their scholarship focused on the cultural apparatus of the theater: it was noisy; catered to the whims of the audience; was hopelessly political; and demanded spectacle on a large scale, such as animals onstage, elaborate costuming, and even fireworks or huge water tanks in which to situate what were termed “aqua-dramas.” These critics argued that the subtleties of thought that “high” Romantic writers wished to express found no place in such a

medium, and thus these figures so often turned to the closet as a refuge. Such a formulation set up an implicit hierarchy that cast aspersions on those who wrote expressly for the stage, framing them as pandering to “low” culture and not worth serious study.

Recent criticism has made great strides in leading to a re-evaluation this hierarchy, drastically revising our understanding of the theatrical landscape of the Romantic period. While acknowledging the volatile and chaotic state of the Romantic theater, critics such as Susan Bennett, Catherine Burroughs, Lilla Maria Crisafulli, Ellen Donkin, and Keir Elam have demonstrated the large extent to which plays, both staged and closeted, contributed vitally to Romantic culture, and their great impact upon canonical literature from the period as well. A prominent feature of this new “wave” of criticism has been a focus on women playwrights and actresses, charting their significant contributions to Romantic theater. It has shown how women were some of the most successful figures in Romantic theatrical culture, and that studying them enables us to revise the traditional narratives of theater history in order to better appreciate the contributions of these individuals. While the period’s theatrical establishment imposed severe restraints upon these figures because of their gender, they operated within this framework to provide unique commentary on social and political issues such as slavery, child labor, the American and French Revolutions, capitalism, and urbanity. Women playwrights did not write toned-down works that were less thoughtful or philosophically sophisticated than those of their male counterparts; rather, they commented on and shaped the social and political landscape around them, drew attention to the permeability of binaries between public/private and

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<sup>29</sup> See, especially, Alan Richardson’s *A Mental Theater: Poetic Drama and Consciousness in the*

masculine/feminine, and offered revisions of the period's understanding of historiography, all while managing to avoid the threat of the censor and crafting works that would, at the same time, please diverse audiences across multiple settings with widely varying sets of expectations.<sup>30</sup>

While I certainly don't want to return to the views of earlier critics who framed Romantic drama, especially that by women, in pejorative terms, I would, however, like to question the extent to which these works universally understood themselves as participating in the kinds of positive (or, to put it another way, affirmative) discourse that sympathetic critics suggest. This project argues that Romantic women playwrights certainly did innovatively intervene within the debates described above – however, it asserts that they did so primarily through techniques which focused on removal rather than representation; of rendering conspicuous the voids which they created as a way of gesturing toward that which cannot be articulated. At the same time, in focusing on absence as my critical term, I don't want to repeat contentions that privilege the closet as the space in which meaning was produced, to the denigration of plays that appeared onstage. Indeed, while closet dramas occupy the majority of my attention in this study, staged plays, such as Hannah Cowley's *The Fate of Sparta*, were also vitally important, and thus form crucial components of my argument.

Instead of taking its cue for focusing on absence from literary criticism on the

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*Romantic Age* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988).

<sup>30</sup> Ellen Donkin describes the multiplicity of limiting factors that inhibited the production of drama by women during the period, including male theater managers eager to take advantage of their precarious positions, the lack of a support network, and prejudices against women writing or acting in drama at all. Given these impediments, it is astonishing that women playwrights not only succeeded at all, but were able to produce works with such tremendous impact. For a more detailed discussion of these factors, see Donkin's *Getting into the Act: Women Playwrights in London, 1776-1829* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

Romantic period, this project looks toward recent theorizations of the Early Modern stage for its model.<sup>31</sup> This body of criticism has strongly insisted on the unique position of drama to give voice to that which is otherwise inarticulable, while nevertheless maintaining and preserving the inexpressibility of what it describes.<sup>32</sup> Discussing non-traditional speech acts during the Early Modern period (such as stuttering, slurring, nonsense constructions, and, crucially, remaining silent), Carla Mazzio argues that while these less-recognizable expressions are often eclipsed by an understanding of the Renaissance as an era of intense eloquence,

at the same time, such generalizations have had the power to overwrite an alternative history of involuted speech forms lodged in language practices, textual formations, and cultural phenomena that seemed, to many in the sixteenth century, antithetical to individual and communal coherence. This alternative history can enable us to see literary innovation from an ‘inarticulate’ perspective, where playwrights, in particular, fostered alternative forms of communal involvement precisely by staging, rather than burying or disavowing, such involutions of the word.<sup>33</sup>

Mazzio goes on to insist that

...incoherence was not just the bad ‘other’ to rhetorical fluency or plain speech but also as a site where meanings and emotions disavowed by dominant cultural formations could be voiced and thought through. Rather than simply asking how individuals and communities shaped their world in and through the power of rhetoric or even ordinary language, it is important to ask what it might have meant, on both the dramatic and the historical stage, to speak indistinctly: to mumble to oneself or to God; to speak unintelligibly to a lover, a teacher, a neighbor, or a court of law; to experience verbal incoherence in situations of passionate extremity or cognitive superflux, or to be

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<sup>31</sup> I also draw extensively from recent discussions of Samuel Beckett’s stagecraft, such as Ciaran Ross’ *Beckett’s Art of Absence: Rethinking the Void* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) and Les Essif’s *Empty Figure on an Empty Stage: The Theatre of Samuel Beckett and His Generation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

<sup>32</sup> This is not to assert, however, that these Early Modern dramatists anticipated Romantic writers in employing absence as a critical framework on a large scale. While, like eighteenth-century playwrights, they nevertheless employed it to varying degrees, it did not become consolidated as a response to a nexus of political, economic, and cultural constraints until the Romantic period.

<sup>33</sup> Carla Mazzio, *The Inarticulate Renaissance: Language Trouble in an Age of Eloquence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009). 1.

utterly dumbfounded in the face of new words, persons, situations, and things.<sup>34</sup>

Under this formulation, moments of inarticulateness (or absence), on the stage in particular, point toward breaks or gaps within structures such as the law, economics, historiography, or even more totalizing frameworks such as society or discourse as a whole. Absence is not just a lack, but capable of having a semiotic function through the gap in signification that it creates. By showcasing, and indeed generating, such points of rupture, inarticulacy (whether that takes the form of mangled or malformed utterance, or, more radically, the total lack of articulation) engenders the possibility of opening up a space for entry into, and therefore revision of, these underlying structures.

Since this study treats that which can only be defined by exclusion, it likewise rejects a strict adherence to any one methodological framework, instead drawing from components of many. For example, from theorizations of trauma this study takes attention to those moments in which language breaks down because it proves inadequate to address the scale of what is before the observer, resulting in a failure to process the experience at the time of its occurrence.<sup>35</sup> Like victims of social or personal trauma (although obviously to a severely restricted extent), Romantic women playwrights attempted to re-enact life experiences which belied direct representation by displacing engagement with them to other realms. The mechanisms of trauma

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Cathy Caruth's observation that trauma is "always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language" (*Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). 4.). In other words, one is able to delimit the event which cannot be spoken of through adopting a circumambulating approach that traces the outlines of what has come both before and after; by "permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not" (11; emphases in original).

theory, such as attending to the trace of the event because the actual experience has been erased from conscious recognition, are essential to understanding works by these figures. Likewise, from psychoanalysis the study takes the prerogative to elicit what is unspeakable for a given play through its seemingly hidden exclamations. The negative spaces that these writers created functioned on the cultural plane like dreams, which expose indirectly that which cannot be articulated by the conscious mind. The promise of dreamwork, and negative spaces, is that such indirect approaches may allow the individual to engage with subjects that would ordinarily be beyond his or her reach. From postcolonial and feminist theory, it takes attention to the categorization of women along the lines of the Other, and their subsequent displacement, often even within their own works. In her discussion of the ways in which women are “cut” from representations of North African society and of her own methodology in *Algeria Cuts*, Ranjana Khanna describes how

the feminist analysis in this study, then, insists on looking at the cuts through representation, sometimes sewing them together and other times acknowledging the pertinence of the gape in such a way as to give the possibility of hope through acknowledging that very impossibility. In *Algeria Cuts*, women are shown to elude and confound the dominant structures of colonial and postcolonial representation present in art, film, literature, politics, and law – even when, and perhaps especially when, the figure of woman seems most present.<sup>36</sup>

Attention to these gaps within both history and text, as well as the paradoxical construction of women as simultaneously present and absent, is woven throughout the chapters that follow.

Moreover, since absence necessarily occurs outside of conventional spaces of representation, the texts on which this project focuses each foreground alternative

modes of engagement with their subject matter. Thus, most of the plays the following chapters examine remained unstaged during their own periods, or were written expressly for the closet; those that were written for the stage depict women in ways that trouble or complicate the standard techniques by which female characters are represented. Nick Salvato has described closet drama “not as a designation of a genre with distinct boundaries but as a conceptual tool that can fruitfully guide an analysis of texts with complex relationships to drama and theater; and part of what makes the tool a fruitful one is the elasticity, rather than the givenness, of closet drama as an indexical term.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, describing Joanna Baillie’s closet dramas, Susan Bennett insists that Baillie’s “response [to the difficulties of having her dramas staged] is not, most definitely not, a retreat into the closet, but an imagining of what might better work as a dynamic theatrical experience to meet the ideas and, of course, passions that she imagined three-dimensionally.”<sup>38</sup> The closet here represents a space that opens up avenues for thought that would otherwise be unrepresentable – far from a last resort to be undertaken after all attempts at representation have failed, it exists parallel to the stage as a mode with the potential to convey alternative themes and subjects. The closet dissolves, and opens up the spaces in between, binaries that otherwise seem impermeable. By destabilizing the page/stage division and showcasing its artificiality, closet dramas enable us to chart new lines of discourse within theater theory and practice.

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<sup>36</sup> Ranjana Khanna, *Algeria Cuts: Women and Representation, 1830 to the Present* (California: Stanford University Press, 2007). 6-7.

<sup>37</sup> Nick Salvato, *Uncloseting Drama: American Modernism and Queer Performance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). 4.

<sup>38</sup> Susan Bennett, “Outing Joanna Baillie” in *Women in British Romantic Theatre: Drama, Performance, and Society, 1790-1840*, ed. Catherine Burroughs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). 172.



Each of this project's chapters examines how Romantic women playwrights constructed negative spaces in these ways to comment on a distinct issue, including economics, politics, gender norms, history, and the body on stage. The chapters attend centrally to the text of the plays themselves, examining carefully the ways in which these writers used omission, revision, and removal to draw into focus their own fraught social and political position; as such, each focuses on one or two plays only, using them as case studies for larger patterns.

The first chapter explores how women dramatists intervened within contemporary discussions of history and historiography. I demonstrate that both Hannah Cowley and Felicia Hemans were pioneering figures in historiography, applying newly emerging historiographical models, which presented history as a site of potential for women to rewrite narratives that influenced the present, to their dramatic works. During this period, the concept of history came to take on new meaning. Romantic writers began to historicize the past more and more systematically, reworking inherited narratives of the movement of history. Whereas earlier works had conceived of history largely in terms of prominent male figures, such as kings or generals, and the effects of sweeping events like succession or warfare, the end of the eighteenth century saw an increased interest in the role of deeper social and economic factors, including the beginning of the emergence of the middle class and the rise of the city, in shaping the past, and as such focused more on the common individual's role in historical change. Women writers seized on these developments. As their spheres had been traditionally conceived as the domestic and individual, previously excluding them from historical discourse, the intersection of these realms now provided them with cultural legitimacy in their claims to enter the

domain of history writing.<sup>39</sup> Gregory Kucich has been influential in charting the development of a distinctly gendered Romantic historiography that focused on the affective responses of women and other “peripheral” figures, and that found particularly poignant representation within historical drama by women.<sup>40</sup> Playwriting allowed women to re-write and showcase alternative possibilities of history, and to recapture historical narratives in ways more sympathetic to their current situation. Rather than being passive participants in the narrative of the past, women dramatists could claim it as theirs, transmitting a revised narrative more attuned to their concerns and perspectives to future generations, as well as their own.

Hannah Cowley’s *The Fate of Sparta* (1788) participates in this historical discourse by dismantling inherited gender binaries and showcasing their artificiality. In contrast to a fixed ascription of the gender attributes of strength/warfare/masculinity versus weakness/domesticity/femininity, Cowley’s play shows how these features break down, not only reversing their positions to make women the stronger elements in battle, but intermingling their features to embody them simultaneously in complex and nuanced characters of both genders. Doing so allows the play to represent the inherited legacy of gender as fluid rather than narrowly fixed. In addition, Cowley strategically employs the concept of “fate” to allow for causality and agency centered around the individual and his or her decisions. Rather than presenting “fate” as static and unyielding, out of the hands of the individual, *The Fate of Sparta* shows it to be the effect of one’s past actions that inexorably lead to a given outcome, therefore

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<sup>39</sup> My understanding of the ways in which female writers employed history within the period owes much to Devoney Looser’s *British Women Writers and the Writing of History, 1670 – 1820* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

rendering one's fate controllable; such an insistence upon individual agency was especially powerful for women writers of the Romantic period, as they existed within a cultural context that asserted their inability to produce broad social or historical change.

In *The Siege of Valencia* (1823), the subject of the second half of this chapter, Felicia Hemans takes this historical displacement one step further by rendering her play a closet drama: the work demonstrates the affinity of these two genres, as each enables the playwright to construct hermetically sealed areas in which to generate the kinds of "negative spaces" that visibly stage a social or cultural lack. I argue that the play presents besieged Valencia as an area in which women can successfully push against customary gender expectations, with the figures of Elmina and Ximena appropriating the positive attributes of both genders simultaneously. It is only when Elmina leaves the confines of the city, encountering the fundamentally "other" Moors, and when they in turn invade the city and penetrate the hermetic seal that had divided it from the outside world, that such constructions break down. Hemans' setting of her play in Spain is essential to her project: by displacing the location of her drama in this way, and by framing it as a siege, she is able to examine gender relations as if in a laboratory, demonstrating the positive capacities of such reconfigurations, as well as their collapse in the face of social norms which would place the male value of honor over the female virtue of compassion.

This discussion of the closet and displacement, of dislocation from the stage itself, raises the question of how women writers treated the presence of bodies on

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<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Kucich's "Baillie, Mitford, and the 'Different Track' of Women's Historical Drama on the Romantic Stage" in *Women's Romantic Theatre and Drama: History, Agency, and Performativity*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Keir Elam (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2010).

stage during the Romantic period. Reading Joanna Baillie's 1798 play *De Monfort* alongside contemporary theories of gesture and physiognomy, the project's second chapter argues that the necessary presence of bodies onstage represented an epistemological dilemma in the Romantic period. Faced with ever-expanding theater sizes, without parallel advances in audiovisual technology, audiences had to struggle to hear, see, and otherwise understand the unfolding drama. Theaters and actors responded in a variety of ways: miming, bringing large animals onto the stage, creating a system of body language in which specific exaggerated movements by actors were understood by the audience to represent emotions, or simply shouting. This situation generated a vigorous debate within contemporary aesthetic theory: the meaning produced by the individual actor's body on the stage. In her dramatic theory, Joanna Baillie argued for the necessity of an actor being physically present before the audience, an idea drawn from eighteenth-century accounts of the connection between physiognomy and gesture. Yet she felt that the Romantic stage could not hope to provide an adequate venue for displaying the subtlety on which her dramas relied. Faced with this paradox, Baillie constructed her tragedy *De Monfort* to be legible only within an intimate theatrical setting, one which the major patent theaters of London could never hope to provide. By staging this impossible situation – in effect, putting the illegibility of her drama on display – Baillie highlights and critiques the inability of the Romantic stage to account for such nontraditional epistemological modes.

Such explorations of the limits of representation naturally came to be applied to the political issue of the day that most challenged realistic depiction: the French Revolution. Elizabeth Inchbald interrogates this role of absence within politics as it intersects with the stage in *The Massacre* (1792), and her play is the subject of the

dissertation's third chapter. Direct political representation was already defined by absence for Romantic audiences and playwrights: since the government censor ferociously prohibited the staging of anything deemed to have even remote political undertones, commentaries on current events could only take place through veiled allusions or coded language. Such tight restrictions on the stage, which did not exist for works in print, pointed toward a recognition of the theater's unique potential to generate the realities it describes; placing bodies on stage and having them enact a revolution or the murder of a king, for example, enters these actions into the world in a way that simply reading a text cannot, and therefore must be carefully controlled by the dominant structures of power. As a result, in order to examine the impact of these events in dramas we must look for them where they, strictly speaking, are not.

Women playwrights, with their long history of having to perform rhetorical acrobatics in order to have their works approved of by the public at large,<sup>41</sup> excelled within such confines. This chapter describes how Inchbald's play employs and incorporates into itself the very restrictions to which it was subject. Drawing on Anthony Kubiak's theorizations of terror on the stage within his *Stages of Terror: Terrorism, Ideology, and Coercion as Theatre History* (1991), it argues that through focusing on terror, which I define as fundamentally an absence (from stageability, thought, recognition, and the ability to cognitively process what is taking place), *The Massacre* is able to paradoxically represent the unrepresentability of the French Revolution on the English stage. Simultaneously, through the depictions of its female characters, it connects this political statement to issues of gender: women are as elided from the process of their

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<sup>41</sup> See, for example, the numerous prefaces from the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in which women playwrights took pains to apologize for their boldness in writing at all, begged excuse for

own determination as is the character of Madame Tricastin within the play, and the only mode of recuperation is to look at their moments of forced silence. Building on recent critical studies such as Marc Redfield's *The Rhetoric of Terror: Reflections on 9/11 and the War on Terror* (2009), the chapter closes by examining manifestations of terror as they emerge in our own social and political discourse, offering perspectives on the present War on Terror through the lens of the French Revolution.

Extending the previous chapter's focus on the fraught relationship between female playwrights and representation on the Romantic stage, the study closes by revisiting Joanna Baillie and her 1828 play *The Bride*. Whereas the project's second chapter had shown how Baillie worked against the structures of the Romantic theatrical establishment from the inside earlier in her career, this later work demonstrates Baillie's abandonment of its confines entirely at its end. Given its unique production history as a drama written by an English writer to be performed in Sri Lanka, and one which was never performed on the English stage, *The Bride* forms linkages with the first chapter's focus on closet drama while simultaneously also being staged, albeit in a displaced locale. This chapter argues that on multiple levels – that of plot, setting, and most importantly through the linguistic mechanisms of the drama itself – the play casts the character of the Bride as a figure who is both present and absent, and indeed absent through that very presence. Drawing on studies of the operations of gender within the Romantic period, such as Susan Wolfson's *Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism* (2008) and Anne Mellor's *Romanticism and Gender* (1992) and *Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England, 1780-1830* (2002), it examines the all-encompassing,

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their work due to the weakness of their sex, or insisted that a piece could not contain subversive

subversive systems against which figures such as Baillie were writing. While actresses were obviously a prominent force on the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century stage, *The Bride* demonstrates how the body can paradoxically be placed prominently onstage, even as it is simultaneously emptied of signifying value and thus evacuated from it through that very foregrounding. In so doing, the play employs absence to demonstrate the impossible position of women in English, and indeed Western, society at large: even as they were increasingly placed in the foreground, especially of the theater, this move to prominence took place in ways that also functioned to elide them and keep them positioned in dependent or secondary roles. This chapter explores how, in a period in which women were increasingly finding positions in theatrical culture as prominent actresses, playwrights, and even managers, they were simultaneously disempowered by that very prominence, drawn into impossible binds through the larger mechanisms of theatrical networks. By conspicuously removing itself from the English theater, casting itself off to another continent, type of viewing audience, and theatrical experience entirely, *The Bride* powerfully stages the inability of such an environment to generate the kind of change necessary for women's theatrical success.

In limiting this project's scope to women playwrights, I do not want to suggest that these figures were the only ones employing absence or generating these negative spaces in this way. While this study asserts that women writers of the period used drama particularly effectively in addressing this question of representation, they were far from the only ones for whom it was a major concern. Instead, I hope to identify a trend of which these writers were the primary participants, but which wove as a thread

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material because of the gender of its author.

throughout writings of the Romantic period as a whole. The question of absence is, at its heart, one of representation: how does one convey to an audience or reader that which cannot be shown directly? In this form, this question was asked repeatedly by a variety of Romantic writers, who explored a range of mediums in their attempts to find suitable tools to address it. To take only one example, the simultaneous proximity and distance of the French Revolution, and the almost-frantic desire to conjecture as to its hypothetical effects if it were to “spread,” virus-like, to English shores, evoked a plethora of writings that anxiously attempted to give shape to the cacophony of narratives coming out of the country, and to mold them into a coherent discourse about the Revolution. Such varied works as Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*, and paintings by James Gillray each competed to frame that which was, at its core, fundamentally indescribable: both the chaotic and uncertain present state of the Revolution, and its hypothetical outcome and effects. The disparity of the products of their efforts only points toward the impossibility of the task. Similarly, William Blake tested the very boundaries of print and painting in an attempt to adequately portray his vision of the divine, recognizing that any one medium in isolation would prove inadequate, and that ultimately language itself was an unfit medium. Wordsworth’s famous crossing of the Alps, unrealized in the moment, led to *The Prelude*’s most powerful articulation of the sublime. We might even read the Romantic movement as a whole as stemming from this struggle to represent the unrepresentable: poetry of the period is virtually defined by its insistent efforts to translate the unapproachable into recognizable discourse, and its ultimate failure to do so.<sup>42</sup> One need here look no further than “Kubla Kahn” and

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<sup>42</sup> This Romantic understanding of concepts which trouble traditional representational categories as



its attempt to give shape to Coleridge's dream, the collapse of which exposes the inherent difficulty of the prospect; *Prometheus Unbound* is an extended allegory about the perils of such a retrieval. By and large, however, while this project shows that female dramatists envisioned themselves as offering models which successfully engaged with such moments of inexpressibility, these canonical figures were far less optimistic about the possibility of depicting the unrepresentable. Their alignment with Burke's conception of the sublime actually proves an impediment: if the sublime, as discussed above, is that which cannot be approached or apprehended directly, but which is capable of producing inspiration only when it is viewed (passively) from a distance, the figures commonly associated with English Romanticism viewed *all* that was unrepresentable in these terms. Engaging with it required that the writer maintain an emotional and intellectual distance, and accept the sublime object as fundamentally incapable of being incorporated into recognizable discourse, since to do so went against its very nature. Thus, Charles Lamb argues that seeing Shakespeare's plays performed onstage, after having imagined their characters in our minds, destroys the pure and lofty understanding of the works: "we have let go of a dream, in quest of an unattainable substance."<sup>43</sup>

Anne Mellor notes that with the emergence of a greater presence for women within the Romantic canon has come an increasing confirmation of a few female writers within literary criticism, namely Jane Austen, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary

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ultimately beyond language's ability to convey may be partly responsible for the denigration of staged representation from the period among later critics; we may interpret them as following Romantic writers who cast aspersions upon those who conspicuously entered into the theatrical domain, while likewise ignoring their unique strategies for addressing its limitations.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Lamb, "On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to Their Fitness for Stage Representation" in *The Works of Charles Lamb in Five Volumes*, vols. 4 and 5 (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1882). 70.

Shelley – whom she terms the new “Big Three.”<sup>44</sup> She argues that while this revisionist canon is more inclusive of female voices, it can too easily become just another ossified corpus, with the result that the wide range of other female writers who were active during the period remains excluded and overlooked. I would like to extend Mellor’s concerns about authors, and also address alternative modes of textual engagement: one of the aims of this project is to draw attention to the varied ways in which Romantic writers situated their works in relation to the audience or reader. Indeed, it is no surprise that works such as the ones on which this study focuses should be passed over, as their authors often deliberately occluded parts of the text, or even its entirety, from the public eye. However, this study hopes to contribute to the larger work of painting a more accurate picture of the complexity, diversity, and even sheer messiness of the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, one that takes into account those figures often elided from the construction of our understanding of the period. It is my hope that future projects will build upon this study’s framework, attending to the ways in which absence is functioning within works that were more prominently staged; works by male playwrights; works by lesser-known women playwrights, especially those operating primarily outside of London; and even novels, essays, and poems by writers of both genders. Doing so will allow us to better understand the mechanisms of unexplored works, and even unexamined aspects of well-known works, which would otherwise remain, like negative spaces themselves, hidden from sight.

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<sup>44</sup> Anne Mellor, “Thoughts on *Romanticism and Gender*” in *European Romantic Review*, 23.3 (June

**History in the Closet: Hannah Cowley's *The Fate of Sparta* and Felicia Hemans' *The Siege of Valencia***

The traditional narrative of history during the eighteenth century goes as follows: by the beginning of the 1700's, historical writing was markedly non-empirical, unconcerned with narrative, audience, documentation of sources, or larger questions of historiography. A few highly influential writers, such as Edward Gibbon, David Hume, and William Robertson, fundamentally reworked the landscape of history writing, bringing to bear a new consciousness of narrative technique drawn from parallel developments in the writing of fiction. The history produced by these figures and their successors was specialized in nature, and emerged through historical texts focused on describing particular events, regions, or periods. By the Romantic period, history had begun to appear in the form in which we recognize it today.

This chapter attempts to trouble this teleological narrative by presenting analyses of two plays: Hannah Cowley's *The Fate of Sparta, or, The Rival Kings* (1788), and Felicia Hemans' *The Siege of Valencia* (1823). Drawing on contemporary theories of the intersection of gender, history, and drama, it argues that Romantic and eighteenth-century historiography was shaped by a variety of forces through the contributions of amateur historians, women, and non-traditional sources of history. It argues that women – especially during the Romantic period – intervened within contemporary historical discourse, contributing in significant ways to the development of its historiography, and applying historiographical models more broadly to a range of subjects. Cowley and Hemans in particular did so through dramatic writing: for Cowley, the models which historiography presented could be used to comment on

issues of gender, politics, and even philosophy; for Hemans, the form of the history play represented a site of displacement that revealed its affinity with the closet drama, and her play thus represents a point of intersection between these two forms. Taken together, these works support an argument for a more far-ranging reading of history and historiography by women, one that takes into account the ways in which their writing intervened within both expected and unexpected realms. By extending previous models for understanding history and applying them to a range of concepts, not just those normally associated with their gender, these playwrights demonstrate the malleability of history and historical discourse within their period, and its potential to simultaneously reflect on and create the present moment. Crucially, each of these figurations constructs history fundamentally in terms of absence, casting the past as a void that can be populated by narratives outside the normal range of possibilities; historiography therefore carries the potential for significant revision or even total rewriting of that past narrative. History thus emerges as a negative space for Romantic women dramatists, with the emptiness of the past as precisely its condition of possibility.

### 3. *History's History*

Recent scholarship has begun to paint a very different picture of history during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries than that which has commonly been associated with these periods. Rather than arising from a few exceptional historians out of the void of earlier unsophisticated writings, historiography developed gradually

from the theories that had come before, and underwent multiple shifts in content during the period that were influenced by a diverse range of writers and forces. History increasingly came to be systematized and seen as the proper subject of empirical study, like anatomy, yet this examination was open to a variety of practitioners ranging from the professional to the amateur, using techniques spanning the literary and the technical.<sup>45</sup> The emerging conceptions of history reframed it from a passive site to a tool: the past, especially the Classical period and Middle Ages, came to be valued as a means for understanding the present. This understanding was to be achieved by breaking up the past into its component parts and examining its inner workings. Like a medical dissection, historical analysis, it was thought, could be almost surgically precise, opening up the past for the public eye in the same way that an autopsy could uncover the secrets of the body. George Taylor argues that antiquarians “felt that they could recapture something of its [the past’s] exoticism, not only by collection and description, but also by reconstruction.”<sup>46</sup> Historical study thus became a process of reclamation: by re-creating the past through reading and writing about it, Romantics could engage with this object of examination more closely – “reconstructing” it in order to break it down again.<sup>47</sup> The Romantics’ interest was not simply in documenting history, however, but in the analysis of historiographical practice; Terence Hoagwood argues that “the operative concept of historicity as a

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<sup>45</sup> Stephen Bann, *The Clothing of Clio: A Study of the Representation of History in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). 2.

<sup>46</sup> George Taylor, *The French Revolution and the London Stage, 1789 - 1805* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). 48.

<sup>47</sup> For a fuller discussion of the Romantic conception of history as a fragment, or ruin, and the consequent drive to reassemble it, see Sophie Thomas’ essay “Assembling History: Fragments and Ruins” in *European Romantic Review*, 14:2 (2003), 177-186.

hermeneutic problem is a Romantic idea.”<sup>48</sup> Writers of the period came to understand history as more than a passive medium which one could easily document given enough facts and information; it became a grouping of distinct (and sometimes competing) axioms and assumptions about the way the world worked that themselves had to be opened up for investigation and analysis.

The means by which this engagement occurred were equally varied. Readers and writers focused on history as a way to make sense of the current state of the world by looking at its formation, to educate young people, to explore the mechanisms of narrative, and to exert control over the forces of change. While the medium certainly became subject to greater scientific classification and professionalization, these categories – professional and amateur – were nevertheless fluid. Miriam Burstein has argued that current scholarship’s emphasis on the ways in which history as a discipline became increasingly professionalized overlooks the work done by amateur and non-professional writers: “until the last quarter of the nineteenth century... most of Britain’s major historians, from Edward Gibbon and David Hume to George Grote and Thomas Babington Macaulay, were firmly located outside of the academy.”<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Devoney Looser describes how “in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, history writing was an occupation not only for ambitious literary workers and statesmen but for dilettantes and hacks.”<sup>50</sup> Writing and interpreting history became something of a national pastime: during the Romantic period, nearly three times as many historical texts (broadly defined) were published as were novels,

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<sup>48</sup> Terence Allan Hoagwood, “Romantic Drama and Historical Hermeneutics” in *British Romantic Drama*, ed. Terence Allan Hoagwood and Daniel P. Watkins (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998). 41.

<sup>49</sup> Miriam Burstein, *Narrating Women’s History in Britain, 1770-1902* (New York: Ashgate, 2004). 4-5.

written by individuals from a stunningly wide range of backgrounds, occupations, and levels of education.<sup>51</sup> Yet the most significant area in which history crossed boundaries was in terms of gender roles.

Historical writing represented a particularly powerful medium of representation for Romantic women. It opened up the possibility for re-imagining the past, and therefore re-interpreting the present as well. The past thus presented an opportunity to shed light on the present moment, with women operating “on the assumption that the history of the nation, especially when oppressed and battered, could effectively mirror the history of women.”<sup>52</sup> Gregory Kucich has described how traditional “high” historical writing in the eighteenth century had focused on describing the actions of great men such as kings and nobles, and detailing their successes and failures, especially in battle.<sup>53</sup> Since these arenas had traditionally been designated male, history proper was seen as the province of men, with the result that women were relegated to other, less prestigious realms of historical writing that took non-traditional forms, such as educational tracts for young people. Kucich argues that with the growing emergence of a middle class and consequent increased focus on consumerism during the mid-to-late-eighteenth century, historical accounts began to drift toward engagement not just with exceptional figures and royalty, but with

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<sup>50</sup> Devoney Looser, *British Women Writers and the Writing of History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005). 13.

<sup>51</sup> John Feather, “British Publishing in the Eighteenth Century: A Preliminary Subject Analysis,” in *Library* 8 (1986), 42-43; qtd. in Looser, 10.

<sup>52</sup> Cecilia Pietropoli, “Hannah More’s and Ann Yearsley’s Anglo-Saxon History Plays” in *Women’s Romantic Theatre and Drama: History, Agency, and Performativity*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Keir Elam (London: Ashgate, 2010). 60.

<sup>53</sup> “Baillie, Mitford, and the ‘Different Track’ of Women’s Historical Drama on the Romantic Stage” in *Women’s Romantic Theatre and Drama: History, Agency, and Performativity*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Keir Elam (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2010). 27-29.

common people and their roles within the historical narrative.<sup>54</sup> Women entered into historical discourse by marking this shift and taking it one step further, focusing increasingly on “peripheral” individuals (such as wives, the poor, and those who by themselves did not shape history in easily observable ways) and by writing about these individuals’ inner feelings and emotions. As Cecilia Pietropoli argues, Romantic writers as a whole began to adopt an “approach to the past [that] was therefore personal and anachronistic, and less interested in the events themselves than in the ways they were individually perceived.”<sup>55</sup> Kucich shows that, as a result, women were able to engage in historical writing as never before, since the domestic and affective spheres had already been considered theirs.<sup>56</sup> He describes the ways in which women, by drawing attention not only to the events taking place but to the emotions behind them as well, “altered the basic epistemological structures of mainstream history, not so much by repudiating its philosophical and public concerns but rather by escalating its affective and private elements into the center of historical consciousness.”<sup>57</sup> It is not that women writers overlooked or devalued those elements of history that had previously been considered primary, but that they also shone light on areas that had historically been ignored. Taking Joanna Baillie as an example of such a reformulation, Kucich points to her “special concern with the interior conditions and personal situations of her legendary characters as they negotiate their way through difficult experiences. Where the traditional historian will concentrate on heroic actions, her focus centers on the emotional state, the ‘beating heart,’ of the

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 27-28.

<sup>55</sup> Pietropoli, 60.

<sup>56</sup> Kucich, 28.

<sup>57</sup> Gregory Kucich, “Joanna Baillie and the re-staging of history and gender” in *Joanna Baillie, Romantic Dramatist: Critical Essays*, ed. Thomas Crochunis (New York: Routledge, 2004). 112.



individual struggling to act nobly.”<sup>58</sup> As a whole, history writing offered women the ability to enter into a realm that could provide otherwise-inaccessible opportunities for expression. While I agree with narratives such as Kucich’s, I would also like to move away from an account of women’s historical writing in the period that privileges expressions that have been traditionally considered feminine, such as the “domestic” or purely “affective,” above others grounded in alternate modes of engagement. Focusing solely on those areas in which we expect to find women making contributions consistent with our expectations for their gender may lead us to overlook other avenues of thought explored by these writers, such as new ways of conceiving of politics, economics, warfare, or even dramatic theory, to which they made significant contributions.

If women were intervening in the process of historiographical creation, what was the context of this intervention? In *Feminists Revision History*, Ann-Louise Shapiro describes how feminist readings of current theories of historiography expand our knowledge of what constitutes historical knowledge in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>59</sup> She characterizes feminist work as fundamentally a persistent questioning of what is taken as a given in historical discourse, urging new appraisals of methodology, the categorization of gender, and what constitutes historical validity within the discipline of history.<sup>60</sup> She writes that, “for historians, feminist theory is both a powerful tool of (re)vision and (re)writing and a problematic that continues to unsettle familiar modes of explanation,” and describes how one of its projects is to

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>59</sup> Ann-Louise Shapiro, *Feminists Revision History* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994). For a similar formulation, see Michelle Perrot’s Introduction to her edited volume *Writing Women’s History* (London: Blackwell, 1992). 1-10.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 11.

elicit the voices of earlier women writers of history who have been silenced and overlooked in their age and our own, “producing a neglected history of women.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, the essays in the volume attempt to reclaim the work of women historians from the perceived neglect of the writers’ own periods, to attend to them for the first time and to draw out their potential contributions to a historiography that developed without their input.

Such work is certainly crucial to our understanding of the position of women writers of history within the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet it risks retroactively defining the lived experiences of women writers in this period according to current assumptions about their agency and roles. This framework suggests that women have been largely silent as history has been written around them, positing women’s history as something that requires discovery or recovery from its effacement by a history and historiography written by and for men. In so doing, it implies that these writers have had no significant voice in the construction of the historical narrative, which is preemptively gendered male. Women writers are therefore intruders into a historical narrative that by its very definition excludes them. Such a response is emblematic of a larger pattern of approach toward the position of women within the formation of historiography, one that ignores the extent to which women were active agents in shaping history and historical narrative. Claims that applying feminist models to historical works by women allows us to “re(vision) and (re)write” them are, indeed, accurate – but for the present, rather than the past. It is certainly essential that scholarly work on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries attend to a much greater extent to the development of history in this period as it occurred through

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 2, 20.

women's writing; yet we must recognize that such attention was already taking place within the period itself.<sup>62</sup>

Scholars in the last decade have begun to acknowledge the ways in which, rather than occasionally entering into a historical discourse that was primarily male, women were active participants in the formation of a historiography that was interwoven with the contributions of both genders. Critics such as Mary Spongberg have described how “in fact since antiquity women have been writing women's history,”<sup>63</sup> and Melinda Finberg insists: “That women dramatists played an important role in the theatrical history of Restoration and eighteenth-century England is a fact that has been forgotten or ignored for nearly one hundred years.”<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Devoney Looser has argued that “despite the great scholarly gains made behind the rallying cry, herstory's popular myths – particularly about the lack of women who have recorded history – require revision. Herstory may accurately describe second-wave feminists' efforts to construct female-centered accounts of the past, but the term inadvertently blinds us to women's important contributions to historical discourse before the nineteenth century.”<sup>65</sup> She contends that throughout the shifts in the content and production of history and historiography in the eighteenth century, “women did not stand by and watch these changes occur. They participated,

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<sup>62</sup> While Shapiro does acknowledge that it is “necessary, then, to distinguish among the possible meanings and effects of ‘separate spheres’ [between the public and private realms] as used in the past – the way in which it invented a past – and to clarify the distinctions between past usages and the language of current historical analysis” (6), this chapter will take as an axiom that the entire concept of the public/private binary (or male/female versions of history, for that matter) does not itself exist as a category *outside* of “current historical analysis.”

<sup>63</sup> Mary Spongberg, *Writing Women's History Since the Renaissance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). x.

<sup>64</sup> Melinda Finberg, *Eighteenth-Century Women Dramatists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). 1.

<sup>65</sup> Looser, 1.

tangentially and head on, in debates about history writing that effected change.”<sup>66</sup>

These women wrote significant numbers of works (782 by 66 women, according to one estimate<sup>67</sup>), initiated and altered conversations about the subject matter of history, and took on a variety of roles as they helped define the past. Looser argues that, if the contributions of these women are often overlooked by modern historians and gender theorists, it is because they are not always found within expected mediums.

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women “wrote history” in traditional forms such as historical manuscripts, but also in mediums such as autobiographies, diary entries, letters, poems, and travel writings.<sup>68</sup> Sponberg argues that “women who attempted to write history were rarely considered ‘real’ historians: rather they have been characterised as biographers, historical novelists, political satirists, genealogists, writers of travelers’ tales, collectors of folklore and antiquarians.”<sup>69</sup> Works by women, such as Catherine Macaulay’s well-known *History of England*, but also lesser-known texts such as Charlotte Lennox’s translations of novels, were essential in forming the understanding of history that emerged in the period, as a genre of greater literary and scientific pretensions. For example, while it has received scant sympathetic critical attention since its publication, Hester Piozzi’s *Retrospection, or A*

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 2-3.

<sup>67</sup> Billie Melman, “Gender, History, and Memory: The Invention of Women’s Past in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries” in *History and Memory* 5.1 (1993), 5-41. 7. Qtd. in Looser, 5.

<sup>68</sup> Looser, 2. For a more detailed discussion of genre within the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Mark Salber Phillips’ *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>69</sup> Sponberg, 1-2. However, I disagree with Sponberg’s assessment that women turned to less public mediums to represent history, such as biography, in order to “avoid harsh male criticism, because it was suggested that biography did not require the same level of masculine restraint, rationality and pedagogical authority that history demanded” (121). Instead of focusing on women’s motivations for writing (which may or may not be born out of positive rationales), I would suggest that we emphasize the quantifiable *effects* of their doing so. That is, rather than portraying women’s frequent turn to “private” mediums as simply an admission that they could not compete with men on the level of methodological rigor, I would encourage us to view them as engaging with these mediums in order to

*Review of the Most Striking and Important Events, Characters, Situations and Their Consequences, Which the Last Eighteen Hundred Years Have Presented to the View of Mankind* was nevertheless extremely influential in the development of world history as a genre.<sup>70</sup>

It is only by looking at this diverse range of genres, and expanding our definition of what constitutes both “history” and “literature,” that we can hope to capture the wide scope of contributions made by women to the historical narrative. Women did not interact with history in any single, easily defined way, and “future feminist investigations into women’s contributions must define ‘history’ more broadly and must acknowledge that women writers used historical material with widely diverging interests, aims, and results.”<sup>71</sup> It is thus impossible to trace a single thread of focus for Romantic women writers of history, or to fit them within a blanket framework, since their theorizations do not take a unified shape; rather, critics must examine the array of forms taken by their engagement with the past.<sup>72</sup> All this is not to say that women enjoyed unlimited freedom in their relationship to historical discourse; certainly they were subject to a legion of constraints within a field dominated by men. It is instead to insist that they nevertheless had agency and influence within this field through their contributions within a variety of mediums, and to a far greater degree than has previously been recognized.

Yet despite the insistence of contemporary scholars that we must look for

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open up a distinct set of representational possibilities that could not be reached by more traditional modes.

<sup>70</sup> For a fuller discussion of this work and its critical history, see Looser, chapter 6.

<sup>71</sup> Looser, 7.

<sup>72</sup> Catherine Burroughs makes a similar claim in *Closet Stages: Joanna Baillie and the Theater Theory of British Romantic Women Writers* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), arguing of women dramatists that “a good deal of their commentary does not conform to what has traditionally

women's contributions to historiography in forms other than texts traditionally defined as historiographical, their analyses almost entirely ignore dramatic writing by women. In addition to working within the plurality of mediums already discussed (including autobiographies, travel writings, diary entries, and letters), women wrote historical dramas in significant numbers during the late eighteenth century and the Romantic period. While locating a drama in the past was a way for any playwright to get around contemporary censorship laws, or to displace contentious subjects into the safe zone of a distant time and thereby engage with them indirectly, to Romantic women the theater also offered the opportunity to "claim the citizenship largely denied them through other political and social institutions... In this way, the authority of genre could be used to overcome the disabilities of gender."<sup>73</sup> Historical drama was an especially appropriate genre for enacting this process because of its ability to place a body onstage and to implicate the audience in the action taking place: Gary Kelly describes how historical dramas "place the audience *in* history, as observer but also as implied participant, implied agent;" because of their claims to represent reality – to show "real" people before the audience acting out situations that have actually taken place – these plays enable (or, in Kelly's formulation, almost force) viewers to inhabit the subject position of the figures onstage.<sup>74</sup> More than non-historically focused drama, history plays, through their simultaneous claims to veracity by re-creating the

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been called 'theater theory;'" that is, it does not articulate itself in sweeping statements on the nature of the theater (5).

<sup>73</sup> Katherine Newey, "Women and history on the Romantic stage: More, Yearsley, Burney, and Mitford" in *Women in British Romantic Theatre: Drama, Performance, and Society, 1790-1840*, ed. Catherine Burroughs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). 79. While Newey is here referring specifically to historical tragedy, I would argue that her argument also applies to other forms of historical drama staged in the period.

<sup>74</sup> Gary Kelly, "Felicia Hemans, Schillerian Drama, and the Feminization of History" in *Women's Romantic Theatre and Drama: History, Agency, and Performativity*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Keir Elam (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2010). 93; my emphasis.

actual past, and their imaginative potential for altering the representation of that past, represent sites of potential disruption of inherited narratives that could be employed by women writers. Additionally, women playwrights used drama to enter into contemporary social discourse, becoming a part of the corporate institution of the theater. By doing so, they could shape social and cultural perceptions of the events of history as they wished, articulating the present through writing the past. Similarly, Lilla Crisafulli depicts the Romantic theater as a site for women to enact genuine social change that was impossible in many other realms. Often constrained by social, cultural, and political forces, and even by widespread dismissal and intolerance within the theatrical culture itself,<sup>75</sup> they were nevertheless able to gain a form of agency through their dramatic writing.<sup>76</sup> For Crisafulli, by representing social change on stage women succeeded in

establishing the presence of women in history while staging their heroines' achievements and catastrophes, or when recording women's voices and protests or representing their silences and subjections. They were, in a word, working out a powerful exercise in agency. Staging women in history meant to display the quality of their [historical women's] experience and to give evidence of their ideas and actions ... Women draw on the past in their plays in order to use that energy and to seek redress as well as a restoration of lost agency in the present. Thus the past helps throw light on a present that needs to be understood and commented on but also to be 'acted upon.'<sup>77</sup>

Crisafulli goes on to argue that, since representation is life-creating, *any* mode of it is a form of agency.<sup>78</sup> While I take issue with such an all-encompassing bestowal of

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<sup>75</sup> For an excellent discussion of the various ways in which the theatrical culture of Romantic England inhibited aspiring women dramatists, see Ellen Donkin's *Getting Into the Act: Women Playwrights in London, 1776-1829* (New York: Routledge, 1995), especially her chapter on Hannah Cowley and Hannah More.

<sup>76</sup> Lilla Maria Crisafulli, "Historical Agency in Romantic Women's Drama" in *Women's Romantic Theatre and Drama: History, Agency, and Performativity* ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Keir Elam (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2010).

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

agency, I agree with her central contention that Romantic women playwrights succeeded in claiming a form of agency for women of the present through their engagement with the past. Re-creating the past onstage thus allowed women to seize the agency that was denied them in other realms.

The fluidity inherent in historical drama offered women playwrights a way to envision a new present within non-binary modes of thought. Cecilia Pietropoli argues that “literary representations of the past, when compared to documentary historical reconstructions, were able to blunt edges and overcome difficulties by suggesting possible, even if ahistorical, solutions.”<sup>79</sup> Because of its imaginative potential for generating new possibilities, rather than simply attempting to repeat the events of the past as faithfully as possible, historical drama was ideally suited for a discourse of change and re-writing. Given that no two performances of a play can ever be identical, staging historical events renders manifest the malleability of historical discourse – it reveals the way in which there is no single, unalterable “reality” underlying representations of the past, but instead highlights their substance *as* representation, thus inviting the viewer (or, in the case of closet dramas, reader) to question his or her previously held assumptions about that past. Women dramatists could represent the way that events had taken place and the path that led to present situations, but at the same time also suggest other routes that history might have followed, laying bare the mobility of their contemporary historical moment as well – creating a new past as a way of suggesting a new present. By breaking down the division between past and present through re-enacting the past onstage (and thus literally bringing it into the present), these playwrights opened up possibilities for



drawing the divisions between other seemingly stark binaries into question as well, such as self/other, public/private, and domestic/political. And, foremost, these writers attempted to blunt conceptual edges in the realm of gender. Rather than dramatizing a strict segregation of women into the domestic/private and men into the political/public spheres, women playwrights blurred these distinctions and offered new ways of understanding their relationship – whether by portraying women as capable rulers (as in Mary Deverell’s *Mary Queen of Scots*), depicting the fluidity of conventional gender expectations through cross-dressing (as in Hannah Cowley’s *A Bold Stroke for a Husband*), or by illustrating male passivity and feminine efficacy in an international setting (as in Elizabeth Inchbald’s *A Mogul Tale*). Doing so showed the falsity of such binary divisions, as well as the ways that the categories ultimately bled into one another. By acting out these “confrontations” onstage, women writers could visibly demonstrate the porousness of these boundaries and their potential for alteration.

Situated within this discourse, this chapter examines two Romantic history plays by women, one by Hannah Cowley and the other by Felicia Hemans.<sup>80</sup> I hold

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<sup>79</sup> Pietropoli, 59.

<sup>80</sup> If this category – Romantic historical dramas by women – seems an overly slender structure on which to build a critical edifice, consider the sheer abundance of these works during the period: between 1770 and 1823, prominent women playwrights in England saw staged or published at least forty-three plays taking historical events as their subjects or settings, among which are *Almida* by Dorothea Celisia (1771); *The Conquest of Corsica by the French by A Lady* (1771); *Percy* by Hannah More (1777); *Albina* by Hannah Cowley (1779); *Malcolm* by Miss R. Roberts (1779); *The Siege of Sinope and Rosina* by Frances Brooke (1781 and 1782); *The Fate of Sparta* by Hannah Cowley (1788); *Earl Goodwin* by Ann Yearsley (1789); *The Siege of Pevensey and Elberta* by Fanny Burney (1789); *Huniades and Agmunda* by Hannah Brand (1792); *The Siege of Quebec* by Elizabeth Forsyth (1792); *Mary Queen of Scots* by Mary Deverell (1792); *Edwy and Elvina* by Fanny Burney (1795); *Almeyda* by Sophia Lee (1796); *The Count of Burgundy* by Anne Plumptre (1798); *Joanna of Montfaucon* by Maria Geisweiler (1799); *Gortz of Berlingen* by Rose D'Aguilar Lawrence (1799); *The Spaniards in Peru* by Anne Plumptre (1799); *Cortez* by Elizabeth Helme (1799); *Adela* by Jane West (1799); *Virginia* by Dorothea Plowden (1800); *Maximian* by Lady Sophia Burrell (1800); *Pizarro* by Elizabeth Helme (1800); *The Tournament* by Marianna Starke (1800); *Constantine Paleologous* by Joanna Baillie (1804); *Rosamond* by Fanny Holcroft (1806); *A Family Legend* by Joanna Baillie (1810); *Ethelred* by Sarah Richardson (1810); *Alfred the Great* by Harriet Fawcett (1811); *Marmion* by Elizabeth Wright Macauley (1811); *Kathleen O'Neil* by Mary Balfour (1814); *Clara* by Charlotte Nooth (1815); *Malek Adhel, the Champion of the Crescent and Aristomenes; or, The Royal Shepherd* by Frances Burney (1818); *The*

that the axioms set forth by the scholars discussed above are, for the most part, correct; I do not try to undermine their claims, but instead hope to extend them. I argue that Cowley's play applies the principle of blurring gender roles to non-gendered concepts as well, thus expanding the scope of women's dramatic writing beyond the range that has previously been accorded it. Hemans' drama is also an example of such an extension, softening the boundaries between closet and historical drama using the same mechanisms as it does with those of gender. Taken together, the plays represent a new imagining by these playwrights of the potential for history to alter contemporary discourse, even outside the range of theater.

In addition, one of the subtexts of this chapter will be the trope of "the siege." Both works fall into the category of siege plays, not only in subject, but also in name: *The Fate of Sparta* was originally titled *The Siege of Sparta*.<sup>81</sup> Sieges were a common subject of plays during the eighteenth century and the Romantic period: there were over twenty dramas on the topic between 1760 and 1830.<sup>82</sup> The trope was a highly versatile metaphor for their lived experiences as playwrights and for the reception of their works, opening up a range of possibilities for women. Foremost, it allowed them to investigate the conditions of seclusion and being under assault, concepts that were integral components of their lives as writers. The setting is claustrophobic, and Anne

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*Battle of Waterloo* by Mary Hornby (1819); *Gonzalvo of Cordova* by Barbarina Wilmot, Lady Dacre (1821); *Owen Prince of Powys* by Jane Porter (1822); *Raymond de Percy* by Margaret Harvey (1822); *The Siege of Valencia* by Felicia Hemans (1823); and *Cardi Castle* by Mary G. Lewis (1823).

<sup>81</sup> Angela Escott notes that Cowley's "first choice of title was *The Siege of Sparta*, but the word 'Siege' is erased in the manuscript, and replaced with 'Fate,'" in "'Bosom'd foxes took their flight': The Duchess of Devonshire and the representation of civic virtue in Hannah Cowley's role for Sarah Siddons" in *Women's Writing*, 17:1 (2010), 49-73. 51.

<sup>82</sup> I owe my attention to the siege play as a popular genre within Romantic drama by women, and my count of these plays, to Serena Baiesi's "Historical Sieges in Women's Romantic Drama: Felicia Hemans, Joanna Baillie and Frances Brooke" in *Women's Romantic Theatre and Drama: History, Agency, and Performativity*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Keir Elam (London: Ashgate, 2010). For a discussion of the trope of the siege drama in French plays from this period, see Simon Schama's

Mellor notes that within it “the soldier and the mother must occupy the same enclosed terrain.”<sup>83</sup> The next chapter of this dissertation elaborates on the mechanisms of women playwrights’ marginalization during the Romantic period, but for now it suffices to say that their writing, especially their drama, was constantly under critical and cultural bombardment, surrounded and isolated by overwhelming cultural forces in the same way as a besieged army. Additionally, by locating their dramas within these hermetically sealed areas, female playwrights could explore gender relations in a contained, experimental arena, controlling outside variables by limiting the influence of external agents. They could plausibly focus on the behavior of a few isolated characters and their interactions with one another. By presenting the women in their dramas who find themselves in these situations as virtuous heroines, playwrights such as Cowley and Hemans implicitly insist on the role of society at large in preventing women from realizing their “natural” potential: given an environment in which they are unbound from social conventions, women in these plays rise to the challenge. Thus, the siege drama serves to showcase the dangers of isolation (indeed, in Hemans’ play *Valencia* is nearly driven to famine and disease runs rampant because of the close proximity of the inhabitants), but also its potential for unhindered development and reflection for women.

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analysis of Pierre de Belloy’s *The Siege of Calais* in *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 34-38.

<sup>83</sup> Anne Mellor, *Romanticism & Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1992).136.

## 2. Re-writing Fate

Hannah Cowley's *The Fate of Sparta, or, The Rival Kings* (1788) largely adheres to the framework of Romantic history plays by women discussed above. It disrupts and dissolves gender binaries in the same vein as do other works by contemporary women, even going so far as to virtually collapse the divisions between gender roles. But the drama also goes one step further, by complicating this discourse in its manipulation of the concept of Fate, the titular theme that runs throughout the text. In her use of this term, Cowley demonstrates the permeability even of seemingly static "Fate," showing that it need not imply only a lack of agency about the past, but also the potential to alter what is yet to come – that it is at once fixed and flexible. By applying and extending the theoretical framework that has previously only been recognized in terms of gender binaries to this non-gendered concept, Cowley's dramaturgy claims for women's writing a scope of significance wider than it has hitherto been accorded – by both contemporary and modern critics – encompassing the philosophical and political as well as the domestic and affective.

Written after her major productions of *The Runaway* (1776), *Albina* (1779), *The Belle's Stratagem* (1780), and *A Bold Stroke for a Husband* (1783), *The Fate of Sparta* (1788) was staged when Cowley was at the height of her fame as a dramatist. Although she has been relatively neglected by modern criticism compared to many of her contemporary playwrights, Cowley was lauded in her own day, hailed by numerous sources as "one of the best... dramatic writers of the latter part of the eighteenth century," and one who has "reversed the flow of dramatic genius from

‘desert[ing] the realm.’”<sup>84</sup> One of her greatest sources of praise was the seeming harmony between her characters’ displays of femininity and her own (performed) role as dutiful wife and mother. Describing a favorable review by *The European Magazine*, Gregory Kucich notes that “Cowley herself made... an important link between stage and social identities, a reviewer concludes, by living out her own ideals of feminine propriety, shunning ‘public celebrity’ in order to seek out ‘the shades of private life’ where she assiduously devoted herself to the roles of dedicated mother, wife, and daughter.”<sup>85</sup> By deliberately cultivating this image of herself as an idealized domestic woman who adhered to the public’s expected standards for decorum and behavior, Cowley carefully manufactured her persona so as to appeal to as wide a commercial audience as possible.<sup>86</sup> In many ways, then, her presentation of these roles was a deliberate performance put on to promote her works; one that, because of the supposed separation between the idealized woman and any economic motivation for writing, also paradoxically collapses itself.

At first glance, *The Fate of Sparta* seems to uphold such traditional gender divisions and roles. Set “in the heroic times of Sparta, but in its latter days of luxury and weakness,” the play takes place after a schism within the Spartan state, in which

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<sup>84</sup> *The Anti-Jacobin Review*, “Mrs. Cowley’s Works,” February 1814 (134, 136), and August-September 1814 (232-234). Qtd. in Gregory Kucich, “Reviewing women in British Romantic theatre” in *Women in British Romantic Theatre: Drama, Performance, and Society, 1790-1840*, ed. Catherine Burroughs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). 51, 53.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 129, 233 in *The Anti-Jacobin Review*, qtd. 61 in Kucich, Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> That women writers of the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were expected to produce works which adhered to narrowly defined standards for their gender has been well-established, and does not need to be reiterated here; for an excellent case study of such treatment, see Susan Wolfson’s chapter “Felicia Hemans and the Stages of ‘The Feminine’” in *Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

its dual-leadership has been dissolved and power vested in the warrior Cleombrotus.<sup>87</sup> His father-in-law, Leonidas, still clings to power, and has sequestered himself under the siege of Cleombrotus, along with Chelonice, his daughter and Cleombrotus' wife. Chelonice, loyal to both sides, persuades Cleombrotus to grant the city a day's respite from attack, only to be branded a traitor first by her father, then her husband, due to the machinations of the Iago-like Amphares. After repelling an attack by his own army, Cleombrotus takes sanctuary in the altar to Minerva, only to be confronted by Leonidas and his men. After Chelonice intervenes to prevent violence, her father is assassinated by Amphares, who is – in turn – killed by Cleombrotus. With his dying breath, Leonidas declares Cleombrotus king, and the play ends with Cleombrotus delivering a paean to the divine will. The extent to which Cowley draws from her acknowledged source text, Plutarch's *Life of Agis*, is striking: while Plutarch only briefly narrates the scene in which Leonidas takes refuge in the temple of Minerva for safety as his life is threatened, the account describes in great detail Chelonice's rhetorical use of the tropes of femininity to influence military decisions, her conflicted loyalties between her father and husband, and her ultimate efficacy in bringing about a peaceful resolution between the two. Even in this original narrative, as in Cowley's, Chelonice enjoys a great deal of influence over the men around her, and is capable of shaping national policy through her pleas that her father not dishonor her – and indirectly his own – family by killing or exiling her husband. The play departs from its source only by altering the betrayal subplot (a sharp pivot, since Plutarch has Leonidas devise the plot) and has Leonidas die at the end of the drama. But *The Fate*

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<sup>87</sup> Hannah Cowley, *The Fate of Sparta, or, The Rival Kings, A Tragedy*. From *The Works of Mrs. Cowley, Dramas and Poems in Three Volumes* (London: Wilkie and Robinson, 1813). 162. All references to the play are drawn from this text.

*of Sparta*'s main divergence lies in more fully developing the points in Plutarch's narrative that relate to Chelonice and the other women, positioning them as its core rather than as a peripheral component. Women are given a wider scope of influence here, not just in the abstract philosophical terms that the *Life of Agis* apports them, but practically; in terms of time on stage and involvement in each of the plot's major moments, they are presented as fully fleshed-out characters with genuine power to change the course of history.

Cowley's account may have also been influenced by Thomas Southerne's play *The Spartan Dame*. Originally published in 1719 after having been acted at Drury Lane, it was reissued in 1774, fourteen years before *The Fate of Sparta*.<sup>88</sup> Like Cowley's version, Southerne's play is largely faithful to Plutarch's original, which it explicitly cites as its source.<sup>89</sup> *The Spartan Dame* largely focuses on the political, rather than the military, struggle between Leonidas and Cleombrotus (pitting monarchy and democracy against one another in the process), and introduces the subplot of Cleombrotus attempting to seduce Chelonice's sister Thelamia. Like Cowley, Southerne makes women and their relationship to power a central component of his play, declaring that "The ladies are the chief-invited guests" to the drama.<sup>90</sup> The main difference between the texts lies in their presentation of Chelonice. In both plays Chelonice is the paragon of virtue and familial obedience, and the conflict in her character only arises when the two objects of that obedience, father and husband, are opposed to one another and each demand her allegiance. Yet in contrast to *The Fate*

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<sup>88</sup> Thomas Southerne, *The Spartan Dame* in *Plays Written by Thomas Southerne, Esq.*, Vol. 3 (London: Evans and Becket: 1774). Interestingly, this volume also includes a play by Southerne titled *The Fate of Capua*, although it has little in common with Cowley's drama beyond the name.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 96.

of *Sparta*'s insistence that the historical record is written by women, Southerne's Chelonice obediently tells Cleombrotus that "My fame must live but in your chronicle."<sup>91</sup> Her character is more secondary in the plot, a tool used by the other figures in their machinations to serve their own ends. Cowley's play fundamentally alters the narrative of this character, presenting Chelonice as an agent in her own right who actively directs the action of the drama. While her behaviors still fall under the prescribed roles of femininity, they nevertheless form the center, rather than the edge, of the plot.

Cowley's depiction of gender roles in the play may thus be read as conventional: Chelonice is a stand-in for peace and harmony, set against the male desire for battle; she describes inhibiting passions as "female dread" and "female fear" to be cast away;<sup>92</sup> the play depicts her as constantly vacillating between father and husband; and she is ultimately frozen at the play's end, kneeling over her father's body as the curtain falls, stuck in a perpetually submissive state even as the fate of the rest of the characters seems clearly defined. However, the drama also works to complicate these divisions. Following the trajectory of much historical drama by women of the period, it privileges direct, nuanced engagement with female characters, offering positive portrayals that go against simplistic representations by focusing in on the figures' affective responses to their situations. Such attention occurs most prominently in the character of Chelonice. In Cowley's Preface to the play, she describes how, "finding however in its [*Sparta*'s] history, combined in one character, a Wife and Daughter with as much of the Heroism of her Ancestors as change of circumstances would admit of, so fine a theme excited the Author to present such a

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 102.



being to view.”<sup>93</sup> Chelonice thus represents the ideal historical woman; she is at once a wife and daughter, yet also a heroine. Consequently, she escapes the simple binary which would couple women with passiveness within the historical narrative, while reserving heroic acts for men. Instead, in her relationships with others, Chelonice consistently directs the action and orients the drama to revolve around herself, often to the frustration of the male characters. Responding to her boast that she has singlehandedly saved the city through her subterfuge, Leonidas exclaims

What! Sparta’s welfare, and her Matrons’ honour,  
Hang on a thread so slight! Our brazen Gates  
Escape their fall but at a Woman’s bid!<sup>94</sup>

And after she has convinced Cleombrotus to forebear destroying the city for an extra day because of his love for her, he laments that

Th’ historic rolls, recording all the acts  
That stand the loftiest in an empire’s fate,  
Report but Woman’s will!<sup>95</sup>

It is not the deeds of men that shape history here, but those of *women*, and proper history is that which details these works; that the two most politically powerful male characters in the play are lamenting this fact only emphasizes its significance.

Chelonice even rejects Leonidas’ offer of co-sovereignty over the kingdom, opting out of the position of nominal, male-oriented power in favor of continuing in her position as wife and mother. Doing so makes the implicit claim that true power lies not with nominal rule, but in the ability to shape public opinion and sway others, attributes that

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<sup>92</sup> *The Fate of Sparta*, 180.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 162. I refer to this section as a “Preface” for lack of better terminology; as printed, it has no designation. I pay special attention to this site in the text following Burroughs’ suggestion in *Closet Stages* that we need to look for women’s theater theory outside of places where it is typically found – sometimes at the margins of the text itself (5).

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 198-199.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 188.

may just as easily – if not moreso – be possessed by women as men.

Similarly, departing from traditional historical formulations that exclusively detail male-oriented power, *The Fate of Sparta* instead depicts the ways in which women exercise control or authority. Power in the play is itself gendered: for men, it lies in the capacity to make war; for women, in the ability to prevent it. In keeping with this focus on feminine power, the drama as a whole is less interested in war than peace, endlessly postponing the actual battle for the city, which ultimately never takes place. Cowley refuses to stage a battle itself, the type of event on which history is traditionally based, but which always excludes women. When fighting does break out, it is contained entirely offstage, as are all three scenes in which characters are killed (Nicroates, Amphares, and Leonidas). Instead, the play directs the overwhelming majority of its focus to the nuances of dialogue between characters, the verbal battles that it places within the purview of women, and on which the ultimate fate of the play hinges.

By presenting characters and scenarios in which conventional gender expectations are bent to the point of breaking, Cowley's dramaturgy invites us to read binary oppositions between masculine and feminine as not simply permeable, but fully collapsible. While Chelonice does take on distinctly feminine traits, she also avoids being slotted along simple gender lines: refusing to choose her husband over her father, or vice versa, she spends the play negotiating their competing interests, weaving constantly between them. This emotional vacillation is mirrored by her physically moving back and forth between the two men throughout the course of the play, going from one camp to another. In one striking passage, Amphares, believing that Chelonice has betrayed her father in favor of her husband, asks Leonidas to be

patient, since

In Conflict now  
Are filial duty and connubial love,  
Opposing Principles – and one must yield!  
Forgive! If, trembling, filial duty fail,  
And give the dubious triumph to a husband,

to which Chelonice counters,

Who told thee that those Principles oppose?  
That one must yield? Has Nature then, improvident,  
So narrow formed the Heart, that only one  
Of all the various Duties she commands,  
Can there have rule? Misjudging Reasoner know,  
That duties of the Wife and Child may each,  
Without opposing, sway the heart. – In mine  
They both, co-equally, exist!<sup>96</sup>

The passage is emblematic of the rhetoric of conflict coming into contact with that of unity. Whereas Amphares cannot think outside of binary oppositions between individuals because of conflicting goals, a mentality that is fundamentally grounded in war, Chelonice advocates one that offers the possibility of harmony and blending of what are, at face value, competing interests.<sup>97</sup> Consequently, she at once casts herself as both “Wife” and “Child.”<sup>98</sup> She portrays the two sets of “Duties,” which may be understood fundamentally as that of domestic versus state loyalty, as harmonious according to “Nature” – it is only society, by “telling” Amphares that these sets are oppositional, which manufactures discontent. In her own heart, and in Nature (which

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<sup>96</sup> *The Fate of Sparta*, 200-201.

<sup>97</sup> Betsy Bolton makes a similar claim about how gender is operating in Cowley’s *A Bold Stroke for a Husband*, arguing that “masculinity as a distinctive quality becomes remarkably elusive, pointing back toward a confounding of the two sexes that replaces masculinity with the hybridity of cross-dressing or sexual counterperformance... [the play] ends with a double negation of gender: ungentle women may be indistinguishable from men, but men, vain and disempowered, are indistinguishable from women” (Betsy Bolton, “Hannah Cowley, Gender Identity, and *A Bold Stroke for a Husband*” in *Teaching Women Playwrights of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century*, ed. Bonnie Nelson and Catherine Burroughs (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2010). 161-173, at 170).

is conspicuously gendered female), these duties both hold sway and are united “without opposing” one another, a paradox to which the emotionless “Reasoner” is blind. Her implicit argument is that the heart is not homogenous, but heterogeneous, and that loyalty to both parent and spouse are inherent within its very nature. Ultimately, Chelonice remains frozen at the end of the play because this unity has broken down – she is paralyzed because the (to her necessary) divide, which encompassed love for two opposing individuals and which had constituted her identity, has come undone by the death of one.

This sense of the division of love between parent and spouse is further triangulated by the casting of the play, in which Sarah Siddons and John Philip Kemble acted the parts of Chelonice and Cleombrotus: aside from being two of the most famous presences on the late-eighteenth-century stage, famed for their leads in Shakespearean tragedies, the two were also brother and sister.<sup>99</sup> As spouses in the drama, and members of the same family outside of it, a performance featuring the two would have challenged the claim of the play’s male characters that love must necessarily be at odds with itself. Furthermore, within the play this collapsing of the gender binary is not limited to women, but falls upon men as well: Angela Escott has pointed out that Cleombrotus “combines the qualities of civic virtue with the feminine virtue of compassion,” giving in to his wife’s demands at the expense of military glory, and often privileging his emotions.<sup>100</sup> If we read the play as a commentary on the impossible position of women throughout history who are torn between the

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<sup>98</sup> A phrasing that recalls the *Anti-Jacobin Review* quote above, “she assiduously devoted herself to the roles of dedicated *mother, wife, and daughter*” (emphasis mine). The third term of the trinity, “Mother,” is here conspicuously absent.

<sup>99</sup> *Women Playwrights in England, Ireland, and Scotland, 1660-1823* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996). 149.

opposed binaries of self/selflessness, public/private, and family/nation, then *The Fate of Sparta* proposes a solution to this problem through dissolving these otherwise-rigid divisions.

Yet the play's manipulation of binaries and conceptual reformulations also extends beyond the realm of gender. By reworking the concept of the "Fate" of the title, it demonstrates that the same mechanisms that allow female playwrights to intervene in discourses about gender also enable them to comment on non-gender-specific concepts. Fate, as traditionally conceived, refers to the unavoidable course of history; it is the inevitable outcome of a series of events which will proceed regardless of the wills of the individuals involved. The fate of Oedipus, for example, is pre-determined by the gods, and nothing can prevent the events of his life from unfolding in their particularly scripted way. Joseph Donohue notes that "some two dozen or more plays produced in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have the word *fatal* as part of their titles" and points to the term's long lineage within the eighteenth century, its use signifying the unavoidable downfall of otherwise-noble characters due to external events beyond their control.<sup>101</sup> However, Cowley appropriates the term in the title of her drama, and in doing so alters its meaning. In the Preface to the printed version of the play, she states that "The Fate designated in the Title is no fate fraught with Woe, but the atchievement [*sic*] of the downfall of a Tyrant."<sup>102</sup> Here, Cowley defines fate as the outcome of an *individual's* behavior, rather than of some external agent; it is only unavoidable insofar as it is the necessary consequence of one's own actions. It is an "atchievement" in that the term designates a final desired result, but

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<sup>100</sup> Escott, 64.

<sup>101</sup> Joseph Donohue, *Dramatic Character in the English Romantic Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970). 53.

the word also signals a logical reaction based on prior events. As such, it simultaneously connotes inevitability and potentiality – it is the inexorable drift toward a set outcome, but an outcome that is the result of controllable forces.

By figuring fate in this way, the play insists that it, like history, is at once set and fluid: just as fate is paradoxically both inevitable and changeable, history is grounded in the firmness of events, even while it is open to manipulation and alternative modes of representation, especially within drama. Thus, the play argues that representing the past is the only way to understand the present, since current conditions are the result of what has come before; past and present are linked, suggesting that Sparta's "fate" has determined, and in some sense even *is*, that of the audience as well, even though the connection between cause and effect here spans centuries. Hence, we have Cowley's assertion in the play's Dedication that "Leonidas, at Drury Lane, as in Sparta, is artful, tyrannical, and doats [*sic*] on his Daughter" (165), and the spoken Prologue's promise to transport the audience from England in the winter to ancient Greece: "Presto! I waft you now from Drury Lane, / To Greece, where first Taste rear'd immortal fane" (166). Additionally, the play's Preface describes how "the particular events of the Tragedy are, in a considerable degree, derived but from the Poet's usual source – Invention," even while its generalities belong to "History."<sup>103</sup> By opening up history, and therefore fate, to the power of "Invention" in addition to brute facts, Cowley creates the possibility of reshaping the

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<sup>102</sup> *The Fate of Sparta*, 162.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 162. Cowley's statement has affinities with William Godwin's provocative discussion of the way that history and romance blend together in their engagement with the past in his essay "History and Romance." Godwin asserts that while it initially seems that history is the more reliable of the two forms of narration, ultimately both modes are fundamentally flawed, with the result that we cannot fully know the past in any meaningful sense at all. William Godwin, "Of History and Romance." In Appendix IV of Maurice Hindle's edition of *Caleb Williams* (London: Penguin, 2005).

audience's perceptions of present conditions of existence and society in fundamental ways, ones that offer new opportunities greater than those of an unchosen "fate."

*The Fate of Sparta* is an example of the perils of reading works by female playwrights purely through the lens of gender, since doing so can occlude their contributions in other areas that we might not designate as "feminine," or cause us to think that they can only make contributions in specifically demarcated areas. Miriam Burstein and Devoney Looser have argued that it is a mistake to read all eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women writers as articulating agendas identical to those of contemporary feminists, and Gregory Kucich has noted Romantic women playwrights' ambivalence about social reform for women.<sup>104</sup> To argue that these figures wrote about subjects other than with what we might now consider a feminist agenda is not to ignore their contributions to this discourse or to portray them as blindly reifying existing systems of power. Rather, it is to recognize that these writers did not feel constrained to intervene in only a limited scope of discourse, but confidently approached a wide range of subjects, in ways which were also influenced by their subject positions as women. Ultimately, we must become more aware of the ways that their works made contributions within areas that we ourselves too often designate "masculine," and therefore overlook in our appraisal of them. It is only in doing so that we may begin to appreciate the rich variety of contributions which writers such as Cowley present.

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<sup>104</sup> Miriam Burstein, Introduction to *Women's History in Britain, 1770-1902* (New York: Ashgate, 2004); Devoney Looser, Introduction to *British Women Writers and the Writing of History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); and Gregory Kucich, "Baillie, Mitford, and the 'Different Track' of Women's Historical Drama on the Romantic Stage," in *Women's Romantic Theatre and Drama: History, Agency, and Performativity*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Keir Elam (Burlington:

### 3. *History as a Closet*

Like *The Fate of Sparta*, *The Siege of Valencia* blurs the boundaries of gender roles to the point of near-obliteration. Moreover, as both a historical drama and a closet play, Hemans' text also manipulates these borders formally in terms of genre. *The Siege* depicts the thirteenth-century siege of the Spanish city Valencia by a Muslim army, and the inner struggle of its inhabitants. The Moorish general Abdullah has captured the two sons of the Spanish governor and military commander Gonzalez. As ransom for their life, Abdullah demands that Gonzalez surrender the city; otherwise, he will kill them both. Gonzalez steadfastly refuses, insisting that his honor and that of his ancestors (which include the legendary El Cid) demands the sacrifice, but his wife, Elmina, sharply rebukes him for placing abstract conceptions of honor above the reality of the lives of their children. Meanwhile, their daughter Ximena is attending the sick and wounded of the city while secretly mourning the loss of her beloved in battle. When Elmina seeks sympathy and assistance from Hernandez, a priest in the city, he reveals that he mistakenly killed his own son in battle when the boy was fighting alongside a Muslim army, and thus he envies her position of being able to give her sons an honorable death. Overwhelmed by the desire to see her children one last time, Elmina sneaks into the enemy camp at night in disguise, and, once there, agrees to secretly open the gates to the city in exchange for their lives. However, Gonzalez refuses to comply when he learns of the bargain, and Abdullah kills one of his sons before his eyes, provoking Gonzalez to make a headlong charge against the enemy in which he receives a fatal wound. The play closes with the King

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Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 21-42, citation on 40-41.



of Castile arriving as a *deus ex machina* just in time to rescue the city, Ximena and Gonzalez succumbing to their wounds (his of battle, hers of the heart), and Elmina left alone declaring that she has been “chasten’d” and patiently waiting for God to allow her to join her family in death.

Hemans has been alternately praised and decried for the perceived conservatism of her works, especially in terms of gender roles. In her own period, she was lauded as a defender of both English and feminine virtues, and a great deal of modern critical work has replicated this appraisal.<sup>105</sup> And, like *The Fate of Sparta*, *The Siege of Valencia* is in some ways quite conservative in its depiction of the masculine and the feminine. The drama as a whole may be read as pitting the masculine ideal of heroic sacrifice against a feminine insistence on the value of life, and the meaninglessness of such sacrifice when weighed against the brute reality of the loss of a child. In one bitter exchange at the beginning of the play, Gonzalez berates Elmina for her desire to rescue her children at the price of his honor, and she counters that it is women who must ultimately pay the price for male virtue:

Gonzalez:                               Hast thou cause,  
Wife of my youth! to deem it lies within  
The bounds of possible things, that I should link  
My name to that word – *traitor*? – They that sleep  
On their proud battle-fields, thy sires and mine,  
Died not for this!

Elmina: Oh, cold and hard of heart!  
Thou shouldst be born for empire, since thy soul  
Thus lightly from all human bonds can free  
Its haughty flight! – Men! men! too much is yours  
Of vantage; ye, that with a sound, a breath,

A shadow, thus can fill the desolate space

<sup>105</sup> For a discussion of this reception, see John-David Lopez, "Recovered Voices: The Sources of *The Siege of Valencia*," *European Romantic Review*, 17:1 (2006), 69-87. 71-73.

Of rooted up affections, o'er whose void  
Our yearning hearts must wither!<sup>106</sup>

The words that are for Gonzalez the entire purpose of being – honor, pride, and legacy – are to Elmina no more than “a sound, a breath, / A shadow” that has no substance, which is incapable of filling the tangible “void” that loss of life creates. The masculine perspective is oriented around avoidance (preventing the deaths of one’s ancestors from being in vain, and not associating one’s name with the dishonorable word, which is even typographically set off from the rest of the text in both the manuscript and published versions), while the feminine centers on generation, filling the void and “desolate space” that men have created with their battles. This conflict is epitomized in the play’s competing conceptions of the relationship between human and divine will, which are slotted along gender lines: for Elmina, the focus is on mercy, the position of God sacrificing Himself through Christ for his children; for Gonzalez, it is on the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, and its glory of willing martyrdom in the service of God:

Gonzalez (*solemnly*):                      Hope but in Him  
Who bade the patriarch lay his fair young son  
Bound on the shrine of sacrifice, and when  
The bright steel quiver'd in the father's hand  
Just raised to strike, sent forth his awful voice  
Through the still clouds, and on the breathless air,  
Commanding to withhold! – Earth has no hope,  
It rests with Him.

Elmina:                      *Thou* canst not tell me this!  
Thou father of my sons, within whose hands  
Doth lie thy children's fate.<sup>107</sup>

However, rather than striking a perfect balance between the two poles of male and

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<sup>106</sup> *The Siege of Valencia: A Parallel Text Edition*, ed. Susan Wolfson and Elizabeth Fay (New York: Broadview, 2002). 1.1.267-280. All references to the play are drawn from this text.

<sup>107</sup> 1.1.249-259

female, *The Siege* seems to demonstrate the ultimate superiority of the feminine position over the masculine. Gonzalez's arguments for preserving the integrity of the city at all costs are severely undermined by the apparent inevitability that the besieged city will succumb to disease and famine and the fact that the sacrifice of his sons will only buy the inhabitants a few more days at most.<sup>108</sup> While the virtues of masculine heroic sacrifice are lauded continually throughout the play, in the end a woman is left bearing the burden, with Elmina standing alone in an "unpeopled earth" and testifying to the legacy of that sacrifice's destruction.

Yet *The Siege of Valencia*, again like *The Fate of Sparta*, also follows the track of other historical dramas by women of the Romantic period in terms of dissolving the binary divisions between gender roles. Ultimately, viewing the play as arguing for either a purely conservative or a purely liberal position, or as advocating the advancement of a feminine perspective of war over a masculine one or vice-versa, misses its point: *The Siege* insists on the linked nature of *both* of these elements.<sup>109</sup> When either gender's agenda overpowers that of the other, "both realms are destroyed."<sup>110</sup> Consequently, in response to hearing a ballad envying and praising the virtues of those slain nobly in battle which ends with "Upon thy name no stain may fall, / They work hath well been done!", Elmina declares "'Thy work hath well been done!' – so thou mayst rest! / – There is a solemn lesson in those words – / But now I may not pause."<sup>111</sup> While she opposes the masculine perspective of the wartime disposition throughout the play, by quoting the passage directly, Elmina co-opts its

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<sup>108</sup> Anne Mellor, *Romanticism & Gender*, 144. See also 1.1.320-331.

<sup>109</sup> Anne Mellor argues that this blurring of boundaries likewise occurs on the level of the public/private: "In *The Siege of Valencia*, Hemans deliberately collapses the boundaries between the private and the public spheres" (Ibid, 135).

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 141.

rhetoric. She cannot rest until she has done the “work” of freeing her children – a configuration that both appropriates and upends the traditional masculine ideals presented in the ballad. Instead of subscribing passively to the heroic code’s exaltation of death in the name of honor, she appropriates its message of self-sacrifice for one’s family into a *living* sacrifice, one which will ensure their survival at the cost of her own virtue. The activity is one of manipulation of the masculine rhetoric from within, using its own terms. Later, when she goes into the Moors’ camp to attempt to rescue her sons, Elmina cross dresses and poses as a message bearer to gain access to Abdullah, dressing as a man in this act of betrayal of masculine ideals. Simultaneously, the cross-dressing itself is a form of betrayal; her success in passing as a man gives the lie to the rigidity of these purportedly masculine ideals as either inherently masculine or feminine.

If Elmina then walks (both literally and figuratively) between the two camps of the masculine and the feminine, her daughter Ximena is situated at the intersection between the two. On one hand, she is the most rhetorically bellicose (and effective) character in the play, allying herself with her father:

Ximena: Rise and arm!  
E'en now the children of your chief are led  
Forth by the Moor to perish! – Shall this be,  
Shall the high sound of such a name be hush'd,  
I' th' land to which for ages it hath been  
A battle-word, as 'twere some passing note  
Of shepherd-music?<sup>112</sup>

Ximena's appeals to the glorious past of her ancestors resonate with those of Gonzalez and Hernandez, an insistence that the value of present life lies in preserving the dignity of the dead. Whereas Elmina earlier declared the worthlessness of heroic legacy as "a

<sup>111</sup> 1.2.470-474.

sound, a breath, / A shadow,” her daughter explicitly embraces the value of “the high *sound* of such a name,” while contrasting such sound with devalued and pacifist “shepherd-music.” Yet Ximena does not simply voice masculine ideals through a feminine frame, but is, like Chelonice in *The Fate of Sparta*, simultaneously a faithful widow patiently waiting at home for a warrior, ministering to the sick and caring for her father in his grief: “My father, shall I fill / The wine-cup for thy lips, or bring the lute / Whose sounds thou lovest?”<sup>113</sup> Additionally, her warmongering is not only in the service of preserving her family’s honor, but is also a last-ditch effort at saving the lives of her brothers. Her cries to war are always a response, a defensive rather than an offensive action. However, it is the strain of these dual allegiances between the masculine and the feminine realms that finally prove Ximena’s undoing: she dies of a broken heart at the play’s end, having been weakened by the earlier death of her lover, and finally overpowered by that of her brother as well.

However, the play’s dissolution of binaries does not only occur on the level of gender dynamics: it also takes place formally, through its dual status as both a closet drama and a history play. By partaking of these two forms simultaneously, *The Siege* is able to shift and direct its focus in a more concentrated manner than would otherwise be possible. As a closet drama, it allows for a detailed examination of not only external events, but also of the subtleties of interpersonal relationships and philosophical debates. The play as a whole is remarkable for where it directs its attention: not to warfare or the speeches of generals, as would be expected in a play taking a siege as its titular subject, but to the arguments and inner struggles of its

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<sup>112</sup> 1.6.67-73.

<sup>113</sup> 1.1.145-147. It should be noted that flexibility of gender roles only operates in one direction in the play: women take on masculine attributes, but men steadfastly repulse any attempts at feminization.

characters as they attempt to negotiate an ethical dilemma, which a focus on the events of the battle alone would eclipse. Notably, the play's title does not convey action, but stasis, a "siege" during which the perpetual cycle of war and peace comes to a halt, creating a pause in which to carefully examine otherwise-silenced figures. Here, the battle is solely in the realm of discussion and argument, a stalemate where the only changing variable is time. Despite containing nine scenes, the play is comprised of just one act, further signaling the intensity of its focus on a single subject.

Simultaneously, being situated in the distant past also allows the play to pare down the cultural burden of its contemporary period and focus more directly on the characters and events themselves. While no text can ever disentangle itself from its cultural context completely, *The Siege of Valencia*'s self-conscious setting in the past works to minimize the manifest cultural influence of its present moment, replacing it with one more distant and less overdetermined for the reader. Doing so represents a process akin to scientific experimentation, of singling out a single factor or question, controlling all other variables, and meticulously detailing the remaining element's behavior. Like setting the play in the closet, setting it in thirteenth-century Spain grants Hemans the liberty to focus exclusively on the minute particulars of individual character to a degree that would otherwise be impossible.

The intersection of these two forms points to perhaps the most significant relationship on which Hemans' play sheds light: the connection between the closet drama and the historical play. Both represent a movement *away*: from the legion influences and variables that arise from staging a play; from the present moment; and from the demands of a traditional play to engage with "larger" issues that ultimately obscure powerful subtleties. Instead, both are a form of displacement or dislocation

“away,” a re-positioning of both the drama and its content simultaneously on the literal level and in subject. Works such as *The Siege of Valencia* locate history within the “closet” of the past, a sheltered area which is secluded not in the sense of being a retreat or disavowal, but of representing an active construction of an entirely different form of theatrical engagement. It is only after Elmina leaves the city walls and goes outside of the hermetically sealed area under siege that she begins to break down mentally, doubting her own sanity, speaking “wildly” and with disconnected language: “Never more / With a free soul – What have I said? – ‘twas nought! / Take thou no heed! The words of wretchedness / Admit not scrutiny.”<sup>114</sup> Exiting the closely circumscribed boundaries of the besieged, homogenous city represents a re-entry into the multifaceted external world for Elmina, a movement parallel to stepping outside of the closet and its intense internal focus. In this allegory, to leave the boundaries of the closet is potentially fatal, as it represents exposure to the unsympathetic realities of the contemporary world. By going outside of this space, Elmina reveals the extent to which it, and the play as a whole, is deliberately set apart from the complexities of the surrounding world, and the disastrous consequences of re-entering them. This contrast is rendered even more manifest in that leaving the city leads her to encounter the Arab Muslim Abdullah, the play’s central Other whom the city’s walls have attempted to keep out at all costs. What had before been endlessly deferred through constant equivocation and self-doubt – the decision to sacrifice the city to save her sons – is now decided. Afterward, there is no turning back.

While Hemans’ play is literally a closet-history play, I would like to suggest that *all* history plays in some sense function as closet dramas, and all closet dramas in

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<sup>114</sup> 1.5.188, 208-211; emphasis in text.

some sense operate like history plays. Of course, these terms have never been mutually exclusive: since closet dramas are defined only as works not intended for the stage, their choice to treat history or not does not render them any more or less closeted. Additionally, all plays are obviously in some sense historical, as they are set and take place in a particular historical moment. The distinction I am drawing instead is the particular self-conscious *concern* of history plays in representing or exploring the past, an investment closet dramas may or may not share, and which separates the two forms, despite the fact that they may overlap. Catherine Burroughs has argued that closet dramas should be read “not as *failed* plays (or ones that happened *not* to have been produced) but – instead – as intentional responses to their historical moment.”<sup>115</sup> Burroughs’ use of “historical” here is significant: it points toward the potential for closet dramas to maintain a particularly acute awareness of the temporal moment that they occupy – as they are, centrally, a mode of response which highlights the failure of contemporary dramatic outlets to provide adequate avenues of expression – and of the capabilities of the form of the closet, as well as the history play, to mark that temporality and draw it into contrast with others. At the same time, to read history plays as linked to closet dramas is to align them with the concept of the closet as a space of imagination, in which one may be unfettered by the constraints of stageability, censorship, social norms, or even historical fact. By focusing on displaced or otherwise-absent content, both of these forms permit their authors to explore and examine literally “unstageable” or “unrepresentable” topics, whether these are taboo subjects such as incest or intense violence, or moments in the past that must

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<sup>115</sup> Catherine Burroughs, “The Persistence of Closet Drama: Theory, History, Form” in *The Performing Century: Nineteenth-Century Theatre’s History*, ed. Tracy Davis and Peter Holland (New York: Palgrave, 2007). 216; emphasis in original.



be re-created in the imagination in order to exist in the present. This claim does not seek to erase the distinction between these two forms, as each represents a distinct and non-collapsible model. Rather, it seeks to use the same logic of blurring binaries as Cowley and Hemans adopt and apply it to the boundaries between the staged and the unstaged, the historical and the closet.<sup>116</sup> Learning to read historical plays through the lens of closet drama can reveal the closet factor present in every play, and can teach us how to observe absence and de-staging even in that which is produced; at the same time, reading closet dramas as being in the same family as history plays draws their formal preoccupation with displacement into starker relief.

We should not interpret the turn to these forms by female playwrights such as Hemans as representing a flight away from direct representation or engagement with the present moment due to inability; rather, it constitutes a movement toward a medium more formally capable of providing an adequate means of expression. By engaging with these two forms simultaneously, these playwrights implicitly labeled their contemporary cultural moment as incapable of providing adequate tools for expression – of eclipsing their contributions beneath more seemingly “important” ones. Given their position within a society, and especially a theatrical culture, in which the daily effects of such eclipsing loomed large, women playwrights would have found the avenues opened by closet and/or historical dramas especially inviting. Ellen Donkin has argued that Romantic women playwrights struggled in part because they lacked social networks of other women on which to rely; they operated in relative

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<sup>116</sup> Nick Salvato makes a similar claim in *Uncloseting Drama: American Modernism and Queer Performance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010): “I use *closet drama* not as a designation of a genre with distinct boundaries but as a conceptual tool that can fruitfully guide an analysis of texts with complex relationships to drama and theater; and part of what makes the tool a fruitful one is the elasticity, rather than the givenness, of closet drama as an indexical term” (4, emphasis in original).

autonomy with one another.<sup>117</sup> In this light, I would suggest that the attempt of playwrights such as Cowley and Hemans to generate a historical narrative in which women had more direct and operative roles – in which they actively “wrote” the past in some sense – represents an effort to *create* this kind of community within history. By establishing a genealogy of women who actively engaged in and shaped their contemporary environment, these playwrights generated a community on which they could draw for models for their own activities. In doing so, they turned to the past to provide a more promising model for the present, and the future.

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<sup>117</sup> Ellen Donkin, *Getting into the Act: Women Playwrights in London, 1776-1829* (New York:

## Smiling with Baillie: Physiognomy and Gesture in *De Monfort*

Joanna Baillie's *De Monfort* (1798) is a play about concealment and disclosure: De Monfort flees to a remote German village to avoid facing his shame at losing a duel to his rival Rezenvelt, but is found out; he tries to conceal his hatred, but it boils over; he attempts to hide in the woods after murdering his enemy, but is discovered. Responding to Count Freberg's plea that he reveal his inner thoughts to a trusted friend, De Monfort retorts

Freberg, thou know'st not man; not nature's man,  
But only him who, in smooth studied works  
Of polish'd sages, shines deceitfully  
In all the splendid foppery of virtue.  
That man was never born whose secret soul  
With all its motley treasure of dark thoughts,  
Foul fantasies, vain musing, and wild dreams,  
Was ever open'd to another's scan.<sup>118</sup>

This structure of disguise and exposure is repeated in the play on the level of the body: what the character who “shines deceitfully / In all the splendid foppery of virtue” would seek to hide, however, is unconsciously revealed by the face. This chapter argues that Baillie takes this attention to the countenance as a site of meaning from eighteenth-century debates on physiognomy, the study of facial gesture.<sup>119</sup> Whereas physiognomists (the “polish'd sages” whom De Monfort decries) argued fiercely about whether the face was a trustworthy source of information – that is, whether the features could truly mask inner emotions, or whether a skilled practitioner could

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Routledge, 1995). 19.

<sup>118</sup> All references to *De Monfort* are taken from the Peter Duthie edition of Joanna Baillie's *Plays on the Passions* (London: Broadview Press, 2001). 1.2.91-98.

<sup>119</sup> Technically, physiognomy is defined as the attempt to discern an individual's general temperament based on his or her facial and bodily gestures (and as such is more closely related to phrenology), while pathognomy is actually the correct term for the examination of the individual's current emotional state based on the face. However, most writers in the eighteenth century (and all those discussed in this chapter) used the term “physiognomy” to refer to “pathognomy,” so for the sake of clarity this chapter will do so as well.

ultimately uncover deceit – Baillie instead insists that, within theatrical discourse, the face is the *only* reliable source to reveal underlying motivations. The chapter argues that *De Monfort* is only legible when the audience is attuned to the subtleties of the characters' facial gestures. The smile especially functions to convey hidden meaning within the play, to serve as a barometer for characters' inner thoughts and emotions. Within the major Romantic theaters, however, which by the end of the eighteenth century had become vast, loud, and raucous, Baillie could not have hoped that audiences would have been able to decipher her drama. By releasing the play first as a closet drama in 1798, then staging it in Drury Lane Theatre in 1800, Baillie highlights the disparity between what is communicated by the facial nuances described in the printed text and the impossibility of their representation on the stage. Indeed, this chapter argues that doing so is precisely Baillie's object: by staging the play in this way, she dramatizes the inability of the Romantic theater to account for alternative epistemologies, especially those produced by women, which depend upon subtlety in lieu of extravagance or spectacle. Ultimately, *De Monfort* powerfully insists that the theater provide spaces for such productions, ones whose contributions would otherwise be drowned out entirely.

Can the face lie? This question was the subject of intense debate during the eighteenth century, and sparked a range of treatises, philosophical speculations, and manuals on how to accurately interpret the face and gestures. Professional and amateur physicians, scientists, and philosophers contributed widely to the field of physiognomy, which examined the connection between the emotions and their facial

representation (or lack thereof).<sup>120</sup> The question was of such weighty significance because it was, at heart, a matter of epistemology: was it possible to lay bare the inner workings of the mind, or could a skilled artist conceal them? Put another way, these figures asked if it is ever possible to truly know what another person is thinking, or whether we are fundamentally open to deception.

Proponents of the former view argued that although an individual might try to hide what he or she was feeling, those trained in the science of physiognomy could discern their true emotions. Typically writing during the middle of the eighteenth century, they asserted that the connection between the face and the emotions was absolute, and viewed their relationship in mechanistic terms: facial movements were caused directly by thoughts or emotions, which therefore would unvaryingly manifest on the features. Dissembling the emotions, to any degree other than the most superficial, was therefore impossible, since they would ultimately be borne out on the features, if only one knew how to “read” them on the face. Writers supporting this view of physiognomy would often turn to the example of the actor, whom they claimed could only successfully play a role if he or she actually felt the relevant emotions. John Hill, for example, writes

Would the tragedian strongly impress the illusion of his performance upon us, he must first impress it as strongly upon himself; he must feel everything strongly, that he would have his audience feel: in order to [?] his utmost success, it is necessary that he imagine himself to be, nay that he for the time really is the person he represents, and that a happy frenzy persuades him that he is himself in his own person betray'd, persecuted, and exposed to all the unmerited injuries, for which we are

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<sup>120</sup> For fuller discussions of eighteenth-century theories of physiognomy, especially as it related to acting theory and acting manuals, see Frederick Burwick's "Acting: Histrionics, and Dissimulation" in *Romantic Drama: Acting and Reacting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 80-114; Shearer West's *The Image of the Actor: Verbal and Visual Representation in the Age of Garrick and Kemble* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991); and Joseph Roach's *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

to pity him.<sup>121</sup>

The best illustration of this perspective on physiognomy is James Parsons' *Human Physiognomy Explain'd*. A trained physician and member of the Royal Society, Parsons delivered the prestigious annual Cronian Lectures on Muscular Motion in 1747, of which *Human Physiognomy Explain'd* is the second in a three-part series. Perhaps not surprisingly, Parsons' discussion takes a scientific approach: he argues that the passions' manifestations on the features are no more than the sum of their components, and that if one closely examines each constituent element of the whole, he or she can accurately delineate what the bearer is feeling. He asserts that "any one, versed in the art of designing, may be able to represent the passions of the mind upon the face, by dint of his knowledge of the muscular structure."<sup>122</sup> Such a formulation links the emotions and facial gestures on the physiological level, without any intermediary space in which false representation can intrude; it follows that, being connected in this way, the emotions can influence facial representation, but also vice-versa, with the portrayal of an emotion actually causing the bearer to genuinely feel that emotion as well.<sup>123</sup> Parsons' treatise describes in detail the precise facial muscles affected by each emotion, their degree of movement, and how they interact with those around them, even providing a series of (at times quite disturbing) illustrations of the

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<sup>121</sup> John Hill, *The Actor: A Treatise on the Art of Playing* (London: R. Griffiths, 1750). 106.

<sup>122</sup> James Parsons, *Human Physiognomy Explain'd: In the Cronian Lectures on Muscular Motion* (London: C. Davis, 1747). ii.

<sup>123</sup> Until recently, modern psychologists had dismissed the eighteenth-century theory that the features influenced the emotions, instead describing facial gestures purely as effects generated by the emotional state. Interestingly, however, research from the last quarter century has begun to demonstrate that there may, in fact, be some merit to earlier conceptions of the relationship between expression and emotion, and that an individual's facial expressions may also partly dictate affect – that is, that not only do we smile because we're happy, but that smiling also makes us happy in turn. For two fascinating examples of this research, see Strack, F., Martin, L. L., and Stepper, S., "Inhibiting and facilitating conditions of the human smile: A nonobtrusive test of the facial feedback hypothesis," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54:5 (1988), 768-777, and Havas, D. A., Glenberg, A. M., Gutowski, K. A.,

minute differences between them, such as those of Fear and Scorn.<sup>124</sup>



(Figure 3)

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Lucarelli, M. J., and Davidson, R. J., "Cosmetic use of botulinum toxin-A affects processing of emotional language," *Psychological Science*, 21 (2010), 895-900.

<sup>124</sup> Images taken from Shearer West's *The Image of the Actor: Verbal and Visual Representation in the Age of Garrick and Kemble* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991). 97 and 99.



(Figure 4)

A corollary of Parsons' theory is that emotions cannot be represented perfectly unless they are actually being felt by the individual; discussing false emotions such as forced laughter, he writes, "Another case wherein laughter is unmeaning, is, when a person, dress'd with all the marks of adulation, feigns a laugh, to favour that of a superior, and feed his vanity. Here, too, the other muscles of the face give the lips the lie, and prove the hypocrisy; for it wants their consent."<sup>125</sup> Unless the bearer is truly in the throes of genuine emotion, he or she will bear the evidence of the lie.

However, other physiognomists argued the opposite – that it was possible to



make the face convey emotions that the bearer was not in fact feeling. These writers also found fertile ground for their claims in the example of the actor, whom they identified as the consummate Janus figure, capable of altering his countenance at will. Although those who felt the face to be an accurate indicator of the emotions advocated for a kind of method acting in which actors and actresses actually caused themselves to feel the emotions they would represent, this group insisted that the very existence of acting as a profession argued for the ability of the face to undergo manipulation and to cause deceit. Samuel Johnson, for example, mockingly quipped that “if [David] Garrick really believed himself to be that monster, Richard the Third, he deserved to be hanged every time he performed it.”<sup>126</sup>

The most famous of these treatments is Denis Diderot’s *Le Paradoxe sur le Comédien* (*The Paradox of Acting*), an imagined dialogue between two unnamed speakers written between 1773 and 1777.<sup>127</sup> In it, Diderot ridicules those who assert that the face can only represent emotions which the bearer actually feels, since the entire practice of acting contradicts this statement. It is not simply the ability of actors to alter their appearance, however, that for Diderot gives the lie to this assertion, but their proficiency in rapidly exchanging one guise for another. He gives the example of David Garrick’s famous parlor trick of altering his features in rapid succession:

Garrick will put his head between two folding-doors, and in the course of five or six seconds his expression will change successively from wild delight to temperate pleasure, from this to tranquility, from tranquility to surprise, from surprise to blank astonishment, from that to sorrow, from sorrow to the air of one overwhelmed, from that to fright, from fright to horror, from horror to despair, and thence he will go up

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<sup>125</sup> Parsons, 74.

<sup>126</sup> James Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Charles Osgood (New York: Scribner, 1917). 506.

<sup>127</sup> Denis Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*, trans. Walter Pollock (London: Chatto and Windus, 1883).

again to the point from which he started.<sup>128</sup>

“Can his soul,” asks Diderot’s speaker, “have experienced all these feelings, and played this kind of scale in concert with his face? I don’t believe it, nor do you.”<sup>129</sup> Instead, he argues that the face is a site open to the most consummate manipulation, and that by exerting careful control over each of his features, the actor can actually employ the lessons of physiognomy to make his or her performance more convincing, and even indistinguishable from real emotional display; to appear real, then, he or she must put on a façade. Rather than remaining coldly aloof from those emotions which he or she would depict, however, Diderot’s actor must be acutely sensitive, having a heightened sense which, nevertheless, he or she must suppress in the moment of performance; the actor must be simultaneously “everything and nothing.”<sup>130</sup> This is, for Diderot, the fundamental paradox of the actor: that he or she must be utterly in control of his or her emotions, without actually feeling them, even while trying to produce them in the audience. This latter argument, however, raised a deeper question: if the face was not a genuine indicator of emotion, if actors, and by extension anyone, could duplicitously manipulate their outward features with perfect precision, did that mean that there was no way of determining whether one was being deceived? Would Iagoian manipulators be impossible to uncover? By the end of the eighteenth century, these questions were still being fiercely contested, and the subject of physiognomy was very much open to debate.

For Joanna Baillie, the issue at hand in this discourse was not whether emotion

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 38. As far and away the most famous actor of the eighteenth century, and as a practitioner of a revolutionary new acting style based on forceful, emotional depictions, Garrick was the focus of much of the literature on acting and physiognomy from the period.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 38.

is legible through the face, but whether the face can be a site of meaning at all. Whether the face is an accurate barometer of the internal passions is irrelevant, since it functions to convey a whole range of emotions to a viewer, ranging from fear and hatred to love and joy. In the *Plays on the Passions*, Baillie insists that the face is not only an unerring indicator of the internal emotional state of the individual, but that it is in fact the only reliable source of information about what another was feeling. Her dramas therefore position the body, and the face especially, as an essential site of meaning. She leaves it up to her actors whether they would attempt to genuinely experience the emotions they would represent, or merely mimic their production; instead, her central concern, taken from physiognomy, is with drawing attention to the face as the locus of communication, as the primary medium by which the observer gains understanding within, and of, her dramas.<sup>131</sup>

Of the three dramas which form the first edition of the *Plays on the Passions*, Baillie's *De Monfort* is perhaps most reliant upon the legibility of the body, treating it as an epistemological medium. Like each of the *Plays*, *De Monfort* adopts as its focus a single passion, which the playwright gradually traces throughout the piece, through either a tragedy or a comedy; in the case of *De Monfort*, the subject is hatred, and the medium tragedy. The play describes the fall of De Monfort, an aristocrat who has fled to the countryside for reasons which are initially unknown. He has recently become

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>131</sup> Given her family background, Baillie's interest in physiognomy is unsurprising: her brother Matthew was Physician Extraordinary to King George III, and her uncles were the prominent physicians William and John Hunter. In addition to his famous *Morbid Anatomy* (1793), Matthew Baillie also presented a series of lectures on the "Anatomy and Physiology of the Nervous System" in 1794, in which he agreed with physiognomists such as Parsons that "the different emotions of the mind are also conveyed along the nerves to different muscles of the body, exciting them into contraction. Each emotion, when raised in a considerable degree, sets in action its appropriate muscles, producing a change in the countenance and attitude, which is expressive of the emotion... Volition has no share in these actions" (Matthew Baillie, *Lectures and Observations on Medicine* (London: Richard Taylor, 1825). 146-147).

pensive, quick to anger, and cruel, an abrupt and unexplained shift from his usually kind and lighthearted self. Although he has traveled in order to seclude himself away from an unspoken danger, De Monfort soon discovers that his old acquaintance Count Freberg is also visiting the area, and he is grudgingly compelled to attend a dinner party at the Count's estate. While there, however, De Monfort is horrified to find that not only is his puritanical sister Jane present, but also their childhood companion Rezenvelt. It is revealed that Rezenvelt is the individual from whom De Monfort has been fleeing: while the two had once been close, De Monfort had come to despise his former friend, even engaging him in a duel which, to De Monfort's shame, the less nobly born man had won, but after which had declined to take De Monfort's life. As Jane is initially veiled, the two men both unknowingly make advances upon her, and nearly come to blows out of jealousy; it is only Jane revealing her identity that staves off violence. However, this initial jealousy is the catalyst for De Monfort's downfall: later that evening, he is told of a rumor that Rezenvelt and Jane are secretly engaged, which drives the hate-filled De Monfort to madness. He tracks down Rezenvelt and kills him in a nearby forest, but afterward his guilt is too much for him to bear; locked in a room with the body at a nearby monastery awaiting judgment, De Monfort is overcome by his emotions and dies in shame, leaving Jane alone to tell his tale.

While this summary demonstrates that the play's moral lesson about the danger of all-consuming hatred is communicated straightforwardly enough, the legibility of individual scenes relies upon attention to the facial expressions of the characters: they frown, look cheerful, become confused and embarrassed, and even simply "*look expressively*" in subtle ways that are essential to sense-making in the

drama.<sup>132</sup> These gestures, especially as described in the play's extensive footnotes, are capable of marking off fine shades of distinction, such as the difference between De Monfort's being "*confused*" at a pun by Rezenvelt and, only a few lines later, "*very confused*" at Freberg's denial of knowing a supposed mutual acquaintance.<sup>133</sup> The ability to distinguish between two slightly varied expressions can mean the difference between deciphering a scene and not. In the "Introductory Discourse" to the volume which contained *De Monfort*, Baillie explicitly calls attention to the significance of such seemingly minor and fleeting facial details:

It is not merely under the violent agitations of passion, that man so rouses and interests us; even the smallest indications of an unquiet mind, the restless eye, the muttering lip, the half-checked exclamation, and the hasty start, will set our attention as anxiously upon the watch, as the first distant flashes of a gathering storm.<sup>134</sup>

Baillie insists that an underlying "unquiet mind" can be revealed through closely examining an individual's unintentional outward expressions – despite refusing to acknowledge the truth explicitly, a figure's inner emotions will be borne out on his or her features. These barely restrained articulations offer glimpses into what an individual is actually feeling. Even if such fleeting revelations are immediately suppressed, they still indicate a passion dwelling just beneath the surface, drawing our interest because it may rise up unchecked at any moment. In a play of constant attempts at concealment, subtle gestures are the only trustworthy elements.

When characters attempt to restrain or hide these passions in an effort to disguise their true intentions, they are released with even greater force: Catherine Burroughs describes how "De Monfort's repression of his hatred, his attempt to meet

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<sup>132</sup> 3.1.238, sd.

<sup>133</sup> 1.2.142, sd; 1.2.150, sd.

<sup>134</sup> *Passions*, 73.

the public with a ‘tamed countenance’ (3.2, 88), has only ensured that he will, whenever he is alone, give vent ‘to all the fury of gesture’ of which he is capable (2.1, 80).”<sup>135</sup> While these eruptions of passion do not occur solely when a character is in isolation, Burroughs’ account points to the ways in which internal emotions cannot be restrained, ultimately forcing themselves out upon the face. For example, when Jerome kindly offers him food, De Monfort rejects it and angrily commands the innkeeper to leave his presence. Immediately afterward, however, the stage directions describe De Monfort “*Looking after him, as if his heart smote him,*” signaling that his harsh words belie a concealed affection toward the servant that, while alluded to in the text, is only made visible on the countenance.<sup>136</sup> Without attention to this expression, the audience would have no clue as to the veracity of others’ accounts of De Monfort’s kind inner nature, or the degree to which his outward go against his own ideals and better judgment. Later, when De Monfort is captured by a group of nearby monks after having murdered Rezenvelt, the focus of the stage directions is again on his face:

*As they lead forward De Monfort the light is turned away, so that he is seen obscurely; but when they come to the front of the stage they all turn the light side of their lanterns on him at once, and his face is seen in all the strengthened horror of despair.*<sup>137</sup>

Both the language of the passage and its performance onstage draw out the action, prolonging the anticipation of unveiling the murderer, assumed to be De Monfort, albeit not definitely known until this moment of facial recognition. However, once his face is shown, with all the light on the stage pointed toward it “at once” to highlight its features in the minutest detail possible, all ambiguity is erased; the truth of his identity

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<sup>135</sup> Catherine Burroughs. ““Out of the Pale of Social Kindred Cast’: Conflicted Performance Styles in Joanna Baillie’s *De Monfort*” in *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Theresa M. Kelley (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995). 234.

<sup>136</sup> 3.3.12, sd.

is made manifest in all its “horror.” Although De Monfort will later try to efface this identity, claiming twice that “I have no name” and that he is “nameless,” his face is an indelible marker of his guilt, starkly brought into focus by the metaphorically loaded imagery of light and darkness.<sup>138</sup> However, despite the multiplicity of ways in which characters externally manifest these internal emotions, one in particular stands out: the primary site at which a character’s underlying motivations and passions are revealed within the play is the smile.

When Rezenvelt first appears onstage, he is entirely charming, leading the audience to question whether De Monfort’s description of his villainy is at all founded. He enthusiastically greets his nemesis, jests with him, and even bows in a courtly show of respect.<sup>139</sup> However, when he cloyingly “*Smil[es] significantly*” at De Monfort’s obvious discomfort at his presence, his expression cues the audience in that he isn’t the wholly amiable character that his words, actions, and descriptions by others have so far presented him as.<sup>140</sup> His smile points to a “significant” and meaningful underlying motive, a secret that is shared by the two characters but only manifested onstage through the subtle facial gesture. Later, Rezenvelt again prods De Monfort, emphasizing the disconnect in the play between external appearances and reality. He has been portraying the women at Freberg’s ball as duplicitous, masking their true characters by hiding their defects: the old wear makeup to appear young, the young to appear older; the prim put on an air of gaiety, while the lighthearted work to appear serious.<sup>141</sup> Rezenvelt admonishes De Monfort for his solemnity at the

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<sup>137</sup> 4.3.15, sd; emphasis in original.

<sup>138</sup> 4.3.26, 5.2.60, and 5.2.32.

<sup>139</sup> 1.2.131-147.

<sup>140</sup> 1.2.185, sd.

<sup>141</sup> 2.1.136-154.

festivities, “*Smiling archly*” while asking

What, think you, Freberg, the same powerful spell  
Of transformation reigns o’er all to-night?  
Or that De Monfort is a woman turn’d  
So widely from his native self to swerve,  
As grace my gai’ty with a smile of his?<sup>142</sup>

Although Rezenvelt initially seems to be simply joking with De Monfort, the ambivalence of his smile conveys his ulterior motive: just as an “*arch*” expression combines roguishness with menace, the passage traps De Monfort in a situation in which he may either not smile, thus acknowledging his own unpleasant demeanor, or smile, accepting a forfeiture of his manhood by identifying with the deception Rezenvelt has just associated with women. The passage pivots not only on the expression, but its particular delivery, and De Monfort counters with his own play on the smile:

Nay, think not, Rezenvelt, there is no smile  
I can bestow on thee. There is a smile,  
A smile of nature too, which I can spare,  
And yet, perhaps, thou wilt not thank me for it.  
(*Smiles contemptuously.*)<sup>143</sup>

As opposed to Rezenvelt’s attempt to couch his smile’s meaning, De Monfort instead declares that it alone speaks the truth, being “A smile of *nature*.” Punningly, the phrase simultaneously signifies that being “of nature” is an additional feature of his smile, and that it is as natural as Rezenvelt’s.<sup>144</sup> In revealing the true “nature” of De Monfort’s feelings toward Rezenvelt, the expression of the contemptuous smile manifests the passion that he cannot vocalize and that lingers just beneath the surface of the exchange. If hatred is the passion of *De Monfort*, the smile, beneficent or

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<sup>142</sup> 2.1.166-170.

<sup>143</sup> 2.1.171-174, sd.

<sup>144</sup> 2.1.326.



malevolent, is the medium through which it is displayed.

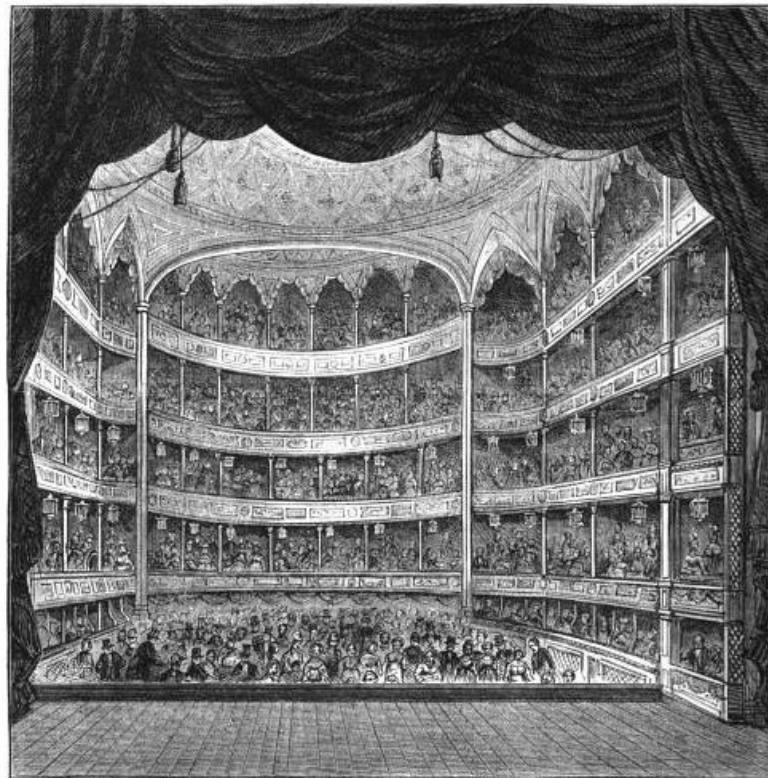
Baillie's insistence on the face as a sort of guiding compass that invariably uncovers that which is hidden is also a political statement about the material conditions of the Romantic theater as a whole; within this environment, her audience could never have attended to the subtleties of gesture on which her drama relies. By the end of the eighteenth century, the English theater had undergone a radical change from its earlier state. As the wealthy patronage that had historically supported the theater tapered off, managers turned for their income to lower-class patrons.<sup>145</sup> To attract these patrons, theater managers cut ticket prices sharply, but this had the effect of requiring them to sell increasing numbers of tickets in order to stay financially solvent. To do so, the two major patent theaters, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, enacted a series of renovations throughout the eighteenth century to increase their size and, consequently, the number of spectators they could hold. These expansions culminated in the early 1790's, at which point Drury Lane was seating up to 3,611 people a night, and Covent Garden 3,013.<sup>146</sup> These newer, larger theaters still featured boxes in which high-paying customers could see the stage from a closer, unimpeded vantage point, but, crucially, they were most expanded in the pit area, which housed the vast majority of the audience, and which stretched on at a great distance from the stage with little gradation in the floor level. Although such a setting allowed theater managers to pack previously unimaginable numbers into their houses, and increased ticket sales dramatically, it also had the effect of putting the largest part of the audience far away from the stage, unable to hear or see most of what was taking place

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<sup>145</sup> Duthie Introduction, 36-37.

<sup>146</sup> Michael Booth et al., *The Revels History of Drama in English*, vol. 6 (London: Methuen, 1976). lii-  
liii. Note that *De Monfort* was staged at the Drury Lane Theatre in 1800.

there. C.B. Hogan describes the fundamental issue of the Romantic theater as “bigness”: “the London stage during this quarter-century [1776-1800] displays the record of managerial and actor attempts to cope with the problem of bigness. Expansion in size if not in comfort, in profit if not in perfection, affected every aspect of dramatic and theatrical production.”<sup>147</sup> One remarkable print, “Interior of Drury Lane Theatre, 1804,” demonstrates this “bigness” by depicting how the theater would have appeared from the vantage of an actor on the stage.<sup>148</sup>



INTERIOR OF DRURY LANE THEATRE, 1804.

(Figure 5)

Another, “Smirke’s Covent Garden in 1815,” adopts a more conventional perspective,

<sup>147</sup> Charles Beecher Hogan, *The London Stage, 1660-1800*, part 5: 1776-1800, vol. 1 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967). xix. For a more detailed discussion of the ways in which figures of this period dealt with “the problem of bigness,” see Melynda Nuss’ excellent and lucid *Distance, Theatre, and the Public Voice, 1750-1850* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>148</sup> Picture taken from Edward Walford’s *Old and New London: A Narrative of its History, its People, and its Places*, vol. 3 (London: Cassell, Peter, Galpin and Co., 1872-1878). 222.

looking down on the stage from one of the far boxes:<sup>149</sup>



(Figure 6)

These prints demonstrate the extreme size of the theaters, as well as how the stage would have appeared to most of the audience. In the latter image, for example, note the relative tininess of the figures onstage, as well as the vantage of the scene, which positions the viewer as the most distant audience member. It would have been all but impossible for someone in such a seat (which, as it was in a high box, instead of the gallery, actually afforded a much better perspective than those of many viewers in the back of the theater) to discern what was taking place onstage. Most of the audience was denied either visual or auditory connection with the actors onstage, severing the

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<sup>149</sup> Picture taken from A. Saint et al., *A History of the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, 1732-1982* (Kent: Roger Godden, 1982). 17.

bond that had united them in the theatrical experience.

To compensate for this distance, actors and actresses were forced to deliver their lines much more loudly, and to accompany them with extravagant gestures, in order to be understood by those in the back of the house. C.B. Hogan describes how

The part of the audience sitting at the furthest remove from the stage must have had obvious difficulty in both seeing and hearing, and by way of recompense it is not to be wondered at that the actors began to raise their voices well above any natural pitch and to indulge in exaggerated action. On the other hand, some of them refused to alter their general manner of performing, and continued to speak and to move as they had done in the older, smaller theatres. The effect was of course equally unsatisfactory, since much of their best work went almost totally unobserved.<sup>150</sup>

Actors and actresses were thus given a choice: they could either continue with the nuanced acting styles in which they had been trained and have their subtleties go unseen and unheard, or they could exaggerate their acting beyond the point of recognition, to the point of conveying only the most general idea of an emotion or scene.

Given this environment, it is not surprising that the theater became less attended in order to watch what was occurring onstage than to enjoy the antics which were taking place in the rest of the house. As the majority of the patrons could not understand most of what was being presented to them, they naturally turned to other forms of diversion. Looking again at the above print “Smirke’s Covent Garden in 1815,” we can note how many of the individuals in the painting have their faces turned away from the stage toward one another in conversation, or are walking around the upper levels. Booth et al. note that “a standard feature of audience behaviour until at least the middle of the nineteenth century, was, during a performance, talking,

laughing (but not at the stage), flirting, eating, drinking, walking about, condemning and praising with equal vociferousness, inattention and a dozen other practices that gave life and colour to the house but were sometimes the despair of authors, actors, managers and critics.”<sup>151</sup> It was common to see prostitutes peddling their wares to audience members, and Hogan describes how people would come and go at all times during the evening, even in the middle of a production; the sound of doors opening and closing was constant, and people were moving about, walking around, and talking with one another from the beginning to the end of a production.<sup>152</sup> While such behavior had been possible before in the smaller theaters, their more compact size had aided managers in controlling the crowds and keeping distractions to a minimum. However, the sheer bigness of the audience in the larger houses proved unmanageable, and chaos largely prevailed during most productions.

Stage managers quickly came to realize that since traditional dramas were illegible to the majority of their audience members, who were in any case talking and carousing during most of the evening, their productions needed to be visually spectacular, and either incredibly loud or absolutely silent in order to be understood. By 1816, an anonymous reviewer writing under the pseudonym Dramaticus would opine that

The public are no longer to be attracted by a certain round of established plays, and a certain number of stock scenes; at theatres

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<sup>150</sup> Hogan, xcvi-xcvii.

<sup>151</sup> *Revels*, 21. It is also important to note here that it is not my intention to argue that the English theater during the Romantic period was at all a site of “low” art, or that it should not be taken seriously as an aesthetic medium. Instead, I’m arguing that playwrights such as Baillie lived in an environment in which large spectacle was the most successful form of communication with the audience, and that it subsequently dominated the stage based on the physical and economic aspects of the large patent houses. Audience expectations about what constituted the theatrical experience were very different, and a play that wished to be appreciated by its viewers had to engage with them in entirely different ways than are now commonly understood.

<sup>152</sup> Hogan, ccii.

where they can neither hear nor see, they must have the stimulus of perpetual and expensive variety of make them come at all, and to keep them in tolerable good humour when they are there; their sense of hearing is only to be gratified by noise, and their sense of seeing by glare.<sup>153</sup>

Playwrights in turn responded to this demand by churning out works that either featured outrageous spectacle continuously taking place onstage, such as “dancing bears,” “reenactments of naval battles,” and even “a dog named Carlo... leaping into the water to save a child,”<sup>154</sup> or plays that did not rely on appreciation of subtlety to be understood, such as pantomimes, farces, or mime shows. Baillie herself decries contemporary productions, noting wryly in 1812 that

The Public have now to choose between what we shall suppose are well-written and well-acted plays, the words of which are not heard, or heard but imperfectly by two-thirds of the audience, while the finer and more pleasing traits of the acting are by a still greater proportion lost altogether; and splendid pantomime, or pieces whose chief object is to produce striking scenic effect, which can be seen and comprehended by the whole.<sup>155</sup>

In such an environment, only loud, spectacle-filled productions, or those that remained completely silent, could hope to communicate with, or be of interest to, the majority of the audience, and thus such works proliferated. In lieu of finely distinguished acting, audiences now came to expect theater that was loud, direct, and would guarantee diversion.

Baillie’s reference to “striking scenic effect” highlights another way in which managers sought to engage their audiences: staging productions with elaborate

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<sup>153</sup> Dramaticus, *An Impartial View of the Stage, from the Days of Garrick and Rich to the Present Period: Of the Causes of its Degenerated and Declined State, and Shewing the Necessity of a Reform in the System, as the Only Means of Giving Stability to the Present Property of the Two Winter Theatres* (London: C. Chapple, 1816). 3.

<sup>154</sup> Duthie Introduction, 41.

backgrounds and scenery. Whereas the eighteenth-century theater had used backgrounds only functionally, having five or six in their repertoire that could serve for nearly any setting, Romantic stage managers quickly seized on scenery as another way to capture audience attention. The sheer size and complexity of these new constructions is conveyed by the theater critic James Boaden's description of a stage setting created by William Capon in 1799: "Capon painted a very unusual pile of scenery, representing a church of the fourteenth century with its nave, choir and side aisles, magnificently decorated; consisting of seven planes in succession. In width this extraordinary elevation was about 56 feet, 52 in depth and 37 feet in height. It was positively a building."<sup>156</sup> (It is worth noting that Kemble would put Capon in charge of the set design for the production of *De Monfort* just one year later; its gothic castle scenes in particular proved fertile ground for his grandiose constructions.) The production of Richard Brinsley Sheridan's popular play *Pizarro* in 1804, depicted below, would have commanded the full scope of scenery technology available at the time, combining as it did an "exotic" setting and multiple scene changes:<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Joanna Baillie, preface to the 1812 edition of the *Plays on the Passions*. From *The Plays on the Passions* (1798-1812), ed. Donald Reiman (New York: Garland Press, 1977). 231.

<sup>156</sup> James Boaden, *Memoirs of the Life of John Philip Kemble, Esq., Including a History of the Stage from the Time of Garrick to the Present Period* (Philadelphia: Robert Small, 1825). 402.

<sup>157</sup> "Sheridan's *Pizarro*: on the Covent Garden stage, 1804." Picture taken from *Revels*, between pp. 226 and 227.



(Figure 7)

The image powerfully demonstrates not only the sheer size of the theater, but also the elaborate scenery in the background. The bodies of the actors themselves actually occupy a relatively insignificant amount of space onstage and in the sketch: the image, and the stage itself, is dominated by the lush and detailed backdrop, which extends the entire height and width of the enormous building. Late-eighteenth-century stage technology, proving inadequate for theaters of such scale, also contributed to the problem of “bigness”: gas lighting would not be introduced to English theaters until 1816, so productions during the early 1800s had to rely on vast quantities of candles, replenished before each evening’s performance.<sup>158</sup> In addition to proving highly combustible, this flammable lighting system provided only meager illumination for

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<sup>158</sup> For a fascinating discussion of the sea-change in the English theater brought about by the shift to gas lighting, see Sharrona Pearl’s “Building Beauty: Physiognomy on the Gas-Lit Stage” in *Elsevier Science* 30.33 (2006): 84-89.



the stage at best, compounding the audience's difficulty in discerning facial expressions, especially for those in distant seats. Allardyce Nicoll describes, with understatement, how

As the lighting was not as good as it became after the introduction of gas and of electricity, it was difficult for the audience in the furthest parts of the house to have a clear view of the action upon the stage; and as the acoustics were not all that could be desired, the hearing of certain scenes was rendered more than difficult. The result was... twofold. The actors, in the first place, felt the need for adapting themselves to the altered conditions, and their performances became louder and more banal. The finer lights and shades were lost; the delicacy of acting which comes only from a *théâtre intime* disappeared because of the necessity imposed upon the players to make their words carry to the utmost galleries. In the second place, the managers found that only the broadest effects could prove successful, and accordingly intensified that tendency towards spectacle in serious drama and towards farcical situation in the more risible types.<sup>159</sup>

This environment had the effect of privileging productions which could communicate with the audience through non-verbal or spectacular means, which did not rely upon subtlety to be effective.

Baillie's insistence that understanding the subtle nuances of facial gesture was essential to make sense of her plays, therefore, went radically against the theatrical climate in which *De Monfort* would have been staged. As articulated within the *Plays on the Passions*, her aim of charting the progress of a single passion required her audience to focus on the actors' and actresses' precise portrayals of fine distinctions. She stresses that they must delineate "the gradual unfolding of the passions" and describes how

In plays of this nature the passions must be depicted not only with their bold and prominent features, but also with those minute and delicate traits which distinguish them in an infant, growing, and repressed state; which are the most difficult of all to counterfeit, and one of which

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<sup>159</sup> Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of the English Drama, 1660-1900*, vol. III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952). 23.

falsely imagined, will destroy the effect of a whole scene.<sup>160</sup>

Her insistence that the “whole scene” will be “destroy[ed]” if actors are not sufficiently precise in their portrayals demonstrates the high value Baillie places on nuance in acting, and the epistemological risks inherent in ambiguity. Yet no one in the audience of a grossly overfull, boisterous theater could have possibly followed such subtle developments; even if the audience were close enough to hear or see the action on stage, these slight distinctions would be lost in the general chaos.

Contemporary reviews of the play emphasized the incompatibility of *De Monfort* with being staged in the major patent theaters. The first edition of the *Plays on the Passions* was published in 1798, and was met with significant critical praise; however *De Monfort* was not staged until April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1800. The play ran for eight nights, until May 9<sup>th</sup>, making it a modest commercial success, and featured John Kemble and Sarah Siddons, the two most illustrious actors of the era, as De Monfort and Jane De Monfort. However, reviewers were quick to point out the discrepancy between the merit of the printed version and its execution onstage, castigating the work for its poor translation to performance. Reviewers at *The European Magazine* hinged their criticism on the play’s supposed non-representability, describing the *Plays on the Passions* in general as “possessing great merit, though not, as appeared by the trial of De Montfort [*sic*] at Drury-lane Theatre, adapted to stage representation” and go on to opine that

While we have been perusing this volume, we have frequently had

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<sup>160</sup> “Introductory Discourse” to the *Plays on the Passions* in Duthie, 104. Paradoxically, then, Baillie would seem to be arguing that actors must manufacture authentic emotions, producing a passion that is supposedly impossible to replicate except by directly experiencing it. It would seem that the only way for this to occur would be for the actors to fully engage with their role, collapsing the internal and the external by actually feeling the emotions they depict, indicating Baillie’s advocacy for an early form of method acting.

occasion to regret, that a person whose talents are so well calculated to restore a true taste for the drama in the public mind should not employ herself in some production for representation, which would drive into obscurity and oblivion the trash which at present usurps the place of the legitimate drama.<sup>161</sup>

Writing for the *Dramatic Censor*, Thomas Dutton describes how Sarah Siddons, the best-known actress of the Romantic period, famous for her depiction of tragic roles such as Lady Macbeth, was herself “apt to fall at times into *rant* and exaggerated declamation” during her portrayal of Jane De Monfort.<sup>162</sup> Even a well-seasoned actress such as Siddons could not maintain the vocal and gestural precision required for such a role within the large, crowded Drury Lane theater. The *Imperial Review*, in suggesting that “Miss B., like the pantomimical tragedians of Germany, is perhaps too profuse of her stage-directions,” similarly misses the point: Baillie’s production relies on non-verbal precision, which can only be conveyed to actors (or readers) through detailed directions indicating the specific valences of meaning that the characters are to convey.<sup>163</sup> Even before *De Monfort* was staged, the *New London Review* called the *Plays on the Passions* “more philosophical than dramatic,” writing that their single-minded focus on a single passion forces Baillie to render simplistic plots and long, “tiresome” soliloquies, and predicted that a production of the play would be fail, stating, “we are convinced, that, upon such a model... no drama would sufficiently fix the attention of a large assembly of people, indiscriminately collected.”<sup>164</sup> These reviewers’ criticisms are each grounded in a recognition that the play simply does not properly *work* in a massive, spectacle-driven climate such as Drury Lane would have

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<sup>161</sup> *The European Magazine*, 42 (August 1802), 126.

<sup>162</sup> Thomas Dutton, *The Dramatic Censor, or, Weekly Theatrical Report* (May 2, 1800). 453. Qtd. from Duthie’s Appendix E to his edition of the *Plays on the Passions*.

<sup>163</sup> *Imperial Review*, 1 (May 1804), 89-97. 97.

<sup>164</sup> *New London Review*, 1 (January 1799), 72-74. 72, 73, and 74.

provided. Only the *New Annual Register* comes closer to the mark when it acknowledges that “However little countenanced her exertions may be by the fickle and bloated taste of the present caterers for the public, the “Series of Plays” before us will be read, admired, and felt, when all the buffoonery that now disgraces the theatres of our metropolis shall have hastened to its merited oblivion.”<sup>165</sup> The majority of reviewers, however, were all too willing to cast out the play in its entirety for its supposed “unstageability,” when in reality it was simply lacking a proper *kind* of stage.

In order to allow the audience to be conscious of the delicate movements on which *De Monfort* relies, Baillie advocates a fundamentally different kind of theatrical experience, one based on small theaters and proximity with the physical stage. In an anecdote often cited by modern critics to highlight Baillie’s insistence on the performability of her plays, the poet William Sotheby describes entering her kitchen and finding her “up to the elbows in flour and paste.” She asked him to remove a small play-bill from her pocket “sent to her by some friend in the country” relating that *De Monfort* was to be performed there by “some obscure provincial company” and exclaiming “there, Sotheby, I am so happy! You see my plays can be acted somewhere!”<sup>166</sup> However, it seems to me that Baillie’s enthusiasm stems equally from the play’s performance in a small, country theater as from its being simply “acted.” As Duthie notes, “she argued for intimate, well-lit theatres, so that even non-verbal spectacle could be more successful.”<sup>167</sup> Susan Bennett similarly suggests that

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<sup>165</sup> *New Annual Register*, 23 (1802), 319.

<sup>166</sup> Quoted from Catherine Burroughs’ *Closet Stages: Joanna Baillie and the Theater Theory of British Romantic Women Writers* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 88-89. Given that the narrative is only described by a second-hand witness, Anne Kemble, and was not written until 1879, we may need to be skeptical as to its complete accuracy; still, its general tenor is in line with Baillie’s other statements strongly advocating the performance of her plays.

<sup>167</sup> Duthie Introduction, 42.

“she might be seen as the champion of an alternative theatre – one who persists in the imagination of a theatre that would work for the script and one who seeks a space that would afford community with the audience.”<sup>168</sup> Catherine Burroughs agrees that

Baillie’s theoretical writing portrays her as a theater artist in search of an alternative mode of staging to those that already existed for showing forth the legitimate drama in London theaters... Baillie envisioned the following theatrical changes: a smaller stage to permit the subtler dramatization of both public and private realms; a more emotionally expressive, less exaggerated acting style to counter the stasis of neo-classicism; and a lighting design that would allow audiences to read the psychological shifts being performed by actors.<sup>169</sup>

Although Burroughs’ interest here lies mainly in the division between public and private, the passage also points toward Baillie’s desire that the audience be close to the actors and able to see their features in order to create an entirely different theatrical experience than the one commonly provided. Because of their smaller size, the performances would not be required to turn to the “exaggerated acting style” featuring overblown gesturing and antics on stage in order to keep the audience’s attention; in contrast to the raucous noise and behavior of the prominent theaters, such productions would focus on the actors themselves, clearly delineating their precise “shifts” and changes over the course of the play. This theatrical setting would enable audiences to appreciate the nuances of Baillie’s tracing of the passions in a way that mainstream theater never could. Unfortunately, in both Drury Lane and Covent Garden, Baillie found nothing of the kind.

Since, as a dedicated theatergoer and dramatist, Baillie would have been well

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<sup>168</sup> Susan Bennett, “Outing Joanna Baillie” in *Women in British Romantic Theatre: Drama, Performance, and Society, 1790-1840*, ed. Catherine Burroughs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). 161-177. 173. Intriguingly, however, Bennett also suggests that some of Baillie’s plays, *Constantine* for example, actively exploit the size of large theatres by including bombastic effects such as artillery and “elaborate settings” (169).

<sup>169</sup> *Closet Stages*, 87.

aware of the conditions of the Romantic stage, her writing of works which are only suitable within a small, intimate venue for such an environment can only be read as a deliberate gesture. That is, rather than simply being a poor fit for contemporary dramatic norms, *De Monfort* represents Baillie's purposeful intervention within this discourse, an active attempt to change the theatrical landscape: the audience fundamentally cannot access the play without attending to the minute gestures upon which its plot is constructed. Not only is the drama packed with fine distinctions and facial variations, but meaning is inscribed as much within the characters' subtle permutations of the countenance as within their explicit dialogue. Correctly reading these performances on the actors' features is essential to rendering the plot, and simultaneously the work's broader significance, decipherable. Indeed, the play is not just "bad" entertainment in a large and boisterous theater – it is by its very nature incomprehensible. By making her play so conspicuously unsuited for the Romantic stage as it was, by in effect staging the failure of the drama to be legible in such an atmosphere, Baillie made a political statement that the period's theater was not a suitable location for the kind of drama she sought to provide: one which eschewed the extravagant and grandiose in order to focus on the minute, seemingly insignificant details that, upon closer examination, are the most important elements of the piece.

This process, of staging others' failures so that the audience may learn from their mistakes, is part of Baillie's larger dramatic project within the *Plays on the Passions*. In her "Introductory Discourse" to the *Plays*, Baillie describes how they will harness the universal human desire to voyeuristically watch others when they are in dire situations:

How sensible are we of this strong propensity within us, when we

behold any person under the pressure of great and uncommon calamity. Delicacy and respect for the afflicted will, indeed, make us turn aside from observing him, and cast down our eyes in his presence; but the first glance we direct to him will involuntarily be one of the keenest observation, how hastily soever it may be checked; and often will a returning look of inquiry mix itself by stealth with our sympathy and reserve.<sup>170</sup>

The stage offers a prime setting in which to observe others in this way, since it allows the audience to see them in their most intimate and undisguised moments. However, Baillie argues that in doing so, the theater can also provide an avenue for moral instruction, since it generates what she terms “sympathetick curiosity,” or empathy based on viewing. A large portion of her dramatic project therefore revolves around putting on display the trials, successes, and failures of her characters before an audience so that the spectators might learn from them and avoid the pitfalls of their mistakes. In the same way, with *De Monfort* Baillie sets the incongruity of the Romantic theater and subtle expression before her audience, allowing them to mark out the ways in which meaning fails to be conveyed, and, hopefully, leading them to be altered by the experience of watching. This is why, despite Baillie’s philosophical objections to the contemporary theater, her intervention nevertheless takes place firmly within the medium of the stage. All of Baillie’s dramatic theory, predicated as it was upon the audience’s ability to gain moral insight through seeing firsthand the successes and failures of characters onstage, required the physical presence of actors and actresses before a crowd of observers: despite its shortcomings, the theater still held out the best hope for Baillie of seeing this vision realized. Her staging of *De Monfort* thus represents an attempt to change the theater from the inside, to put its shortcomings on display in the hope that it might lead to their revision.

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<sup>170</sup> “Introductory Discourse,” 72.

*De Monfort* argues that truth lies underneath all affectation, that it can only be reached through persistent examination. In the play, the smile in particular serves this truth-marking function; the audience must focus on this silent, multivalent feature in order to gain access to the underlying significance of the drama. For Baillie, this expression stands in for a broader project; she valorizes attention to seemingly minor details just as she applauds seemingly insignificant small theaters. As such, in *De Monfort* expressions in general, and the smile in particular, become a statement on the nature of drama itself, an insistence on the necessity of proximity in order to uncover the small, quiet voice.

To close, I would like to examine the figure of Jane De Monfort. Throughout the play, Jane appears as a stereotypically nurturing, angelic character who willingly sacrifices her own desires and identity based on the needs of those around her. For example, in the exceptional final scene of the play, all the characters onstage gather around to support and bolster Jane when she is overcome by emotion. The stage directions describe how she

*Covers her face with her hands, and bursts into tears. Here they all hang about her: Freberg supporting her tenderly; Manuel embracing her knees, and old Jerome catching hold of her robe affectionately. Bernard, Abbess, Monks, and Nuns, likewise, gather round her, with looks of sympathy.*<sup>171</sup>

As the other characters crowd about her, the stage directions anatomize Jane, covering her piece by piece, wrapping them around her “*knees*” and “*robe*.” By the end of the list, she is nothing more than a mass, a pile of the other characters, with her own identity seemingly effaced in the process. She becomes a composition consisting of the sum total of the perspectives and directives of others, registered on a physical



level. However, we can read this impression as deliberately cultivated; in the play, Jane uses this very image of purity and pliability to manipulate others. Jane is the only character in *De Monfort* whose features do not seem to point unerringly toward inner motives that are otherwise hidden, a characteristic epitomized by her wearing a mask at Freberg's ball that she chooses to discard at exactly the moment when it will prevent bloodshed. Instead, she is able to use or hide her gestures in order to manipulate those around her; she is the only character in the play who operates in this way. In one striking instance, she explicitly, although subtly, controls another: Lady Freberg's page describes how Jane looked

So queenly, so commanding, and so noble,  
I shrunk at first in awe; but when she smil'd,  
For so she did to see me thus abash'd,  
Methought I could have compass'd sea and land  
To do her bidding.<sup>172</sup>

While Jane's smile does seem to reflect her inner desires, it is also an instrument that she uses, a means of controlling and shaping those around her to suit her own ends. In place of the purely expressive aspect of the smile, then, we see it here as a tool. This female figure is, I would argue, a metonym for the female playwright – Baillie – and her ability to employ gesture to cast a meaningful glance onto the audience of her plays as a whole. Just as Baillie employs the smile to intervene in contemporary theater practices, Jane uses it to achieve her goals within the drama and direct those around her, imitating the position of the playwright. She smiles alongside Baillie, as they carve out their own spaces on the stage.

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<sup>171</sup> 5.4.104, sd.

## The Order of the Day: Terror and Terrorism in Elizabeth Inchbald's *The Massacre*

In August of 1792, reports began to reach England of the atrocities taking place throughout France in the wake of Robespierre's edicts. Headlines such as "Another Dreadful Massacre!" along with descriptions of "30,000 men, women, and children" attacking the Palace of Versailles heralded what would come to be known as the Terror, and doubtlessly inspired the novelist and playwright Elizabeth Inchbald to write her own dramatic version of the events, *The Massacre*, that October.<sup>173</sup> Yet Inchbald would certainly have known that such a play would never have found its way past the government's ferocious dramatic censor, John Larpent, to see its way to the stage; she prefaces her text with a quote from Horace Walpole's own preface to *The Mysterious Mother* (1791) that "From the time I first undertook the foregoing scenes, I never flattered myself that they would be proper to appear on the stage."<sup>174</sup> Even *The Massacre*'s potential for publication was questionable, given its graphic subject and content – it would eventually be declined for printing by the Robinson Publishing House, with whom Inchbald had enjoyed long and profitable relations, and would only be released after her death as an addendum to a biography by James Boaden. As a business-savvy and commercially successful writer, Inchbald was already well-aware of such impediments to publishing and staging the play. Why, then, did Inchbald

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<sup>172</sup> 2.1.20-24.

<sup>173</sup> I take my attention on Inchbald's likely reading of contemporary newspaper accounts of the events in France from Wendy Nielson's "A Tragic Farce: Revolutionary Women in Elizabeth Inchbald's *The Massacre* and European Drama" in *European Romantic Review*, 17:3 (2006), 275-288, esp. at 279-280. As Nielson points out, the "Another Dreadful Massacre!" headline ran in the same issue of *The Times* as an announcement of the upcoming performance of Inchbald's own play *A Mogul Tale* at the Haymarket Theatre.

<sup>174</sup> Elizabeth Inchbald, Advertisement to *The Massacre*, in *Memoirs of Mrs. Inchbald: Including her Familiar Correspondence with the most distinguished persons of her Time. To which are added The*

write the work? Why would an author whose works were customarily read or viewed by tens of thousands from all social classes devote valuable time to creating a play that, far from being staged, would likely only even be *read* by members of her closest circle of friends (even if those friends included such luminaries as Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin)? Why would Inchbald, a master at writing commercially successful comedies for the stage and a skilled businesswoman who otherwise created only publishable works, write this play – her only closet drama?

This chapter argues that the answer to these questions lies in the subject of the drama itself: terror.<sup>175</sup> Rather than representing an effort to “make sense” of the horrors of the Terror by presenting them on the stage, the play demonstrates that such exceptional occurrences cannot be analyzed or described directly, but only through analogy, displacement, and substitution – hence its obsession with referentiality and the limits of similitude. The play itself *stages* terror’s very non-representability, putting on display its resistance to being delimited by direct analysis. This study argues that using the lens of terror is not only a way to understand the play, but that it is incorporated into its very form and content. Drawing on recent theorizations of terror and terrorism, this chapter reads the play as staging, and participating in the creation of, terror – an obliteration of sense-making and evacuation of the ability to process an event. It shows the ways in which the play exercises the mechanisms of

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Massacre and A Case of Conscience: now published from her Autograph Copies, ed. James Boaden, 2 vols. (London: Richard Bentley, 1833).

<sup>175</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, I will refer to the mass executions of the early 1790s in France and the political and social climate that they created as *The Terror*, while labeling the experience that such overwhelmingly horrific experiences generate as simply *terror*. It will be one of the piece’s axioms that while the two terms are not identical, they are nevertheless intimately linked, as events like The Terror are so named precisely because of their capacity to evoke such a response.

that terror upon the audience/reader;<sup>176</sup> in effect, becoming itself a *source* of terror. While the play presents itself as generating terror (both for the reader/audience and the characters within the drama), it simultaneously functions to provide a means of coming to terms with terror such as that presented by the atrocities of the French Revolution in the early 1790s. By placing these terror-causing events, especially as they occur with respect to women, within a larger narrative framework, the play stages the ability of its female characters to alleviate the effects of terror, and even to enact broader social change as a result of representing it before an audience. In doing so, *The Massacre* does not attempt to minimize or ameliorate the terror which it describes and re-enacts, but rather offers techniques for coping within a climate of terror. It therefore shapes the terror of its subject into a productive organizational principle, reframing the Convention's famous decree that "terror is the order of the day" to demonstrate that the very chaos created by terror can in fact represent an order of a different type, one that organizes itself around the psychological and emotional void that it generates.<sup>177</sup> In the process, the play serves as a commentary on the limits of traditional dramatic representation: it raises the question of how events too terrible to be imagined can be faithfully represented onstage while retaining their emotional and psychological impact. I will argue that through *The Massacre*, Inchbald offers us a way out of this bind of representation. Finally, the chapter will close by suggesting

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<sup>176</sup> Given the play's production history as a closet drama which was, according to Inchbald, never intended to appear onstage, yet one that has also recently seen stagings (in 2008 at the Halcyon Theatre and in 2009 by the Theatre Royal at Bury St. Edmunds) and that includes detailed directions for performance, I will use the terms "audience" and "reader" interchangeably throughout this essay to refer to those engaging with the text.

<sup>177</sup> In light of Inchbald's use of the terror, a force usually associated with social and mental breakdown, for these culturally productive ends, we might consider an alternative reading of Robespierre's comments on the proximity between terror and virtue: "If the mainspring of popular government in peacetime is virtue, amid revolution it is at the same time virtue and terror: virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is impotent" (Maximilien Robespierre, *Virtue and Terror* (London:

ways in which reading a play like *The Massacre* sheds light on contemporary theorizations of terror, opening up new avenues for analysis in current terrorism studies.

*The Massacre* is ostensibly set during the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacres of 1572, in which Huguenots across France were killed in large numbers by the Catholic majority, purportedly out of fear of political unrest. Labeled as having been "Taken from the French,"<sup>178</sup> the three-act play narrates the tragedy of the upper-class Tricastin family, whose scion, Eusèbe, has recently returned from witnessing the horrible massacres in Paris. While attempting to flee the country, he and his family are overtaken by a mob, which captures them all despite the elder Tricastin's effort to sacrifice himself to save his family, and the two male Tricastins are put on trial. The mob, headed by the bloodthirsty Dugas, insists that Eusèbe be sentenced to death for the crime that "he does not think with us," yet the instigator is ultimately overruled by the merciful and just judge Glandève. Despite the men being granted their freedom, however, Madame Tricastin and her children are rescued too late, and brought in on a funeral bier at the end of the final act. The play closes with Eusèbe mourning their loss, and with Glandève's now-flat exhortation that "the first precept in our Christian laws is charity – the next obligation – to extend that charity EVEN TO OUR ENEMIES."

As this brief summary indicates, the play invites interpretation along numerous dimensions, among the most prominent being gender, politics, religion, and the law. Yet I would like to argue that the concept of terror pervades and unifies each of these aspects, and that what I will call the *logic of terror* also threads throughout the text

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Verso, 2007). 115.)

itself, and even describes our experience of reading the play. Before delving more deeply into the manifestations of terror within and around the drama, however, it is useful to define the term and its use in some detail.

Contemporary theorizations of terror have sprung up in abundance since the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, but the term seems to be defined more by dispute over its definition than consensus, and nearly all treatments of the subject deal primarily with “terrorism,” rather than with the underlying concept of “terror” itself.<sup>179</sup> Andrew Hoskins and Ben O’Loughlin, following Jean Baudrillard, link the category of terror with the emergence of the modern media age: terrorism’s reliance on spectacle and mass communication inevitably leads to a symbiotic relationship in which media and terror mutually sustain one another.<sup>180</sup> Terror-inspiring acts are effective precisely because they can be instantly and graphically conveyed across the globe, while media empires require the continual attention generated by the horrors of terrorism to attract an audience. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Walter Laqueur and Matthew Sinclair insist that terror predates the emergence of such media technologies, and has been a continuous presence throughout history. Thus, they craft a genealogy of terror that traces its impact from the ancient to the modern periods, revealing how our current understandings of the concept are rooted in its past instantiations.<sup>181</sup> Still others, such as Matthew Carr, embrace this ambiguity, arguing that “the phenomenon of terrorism is in many ways the sum of its contradictions,” and that terror cannot be

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<sup>178</sup> Title page of *The Massacre*.

<sup>179</sup> One of the goals of this chapter is to decouple theorizations of terror from under the umbrella of terrorism, and to begin elucidating the former as a distinct theoretical term.

<sup>180</sup> Andrew Hoskins and Ben O’Loughlin, *Television and Terror: Conflicting Times and the Crisis of News Discourse* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007).

<sup>181</sup> Walter Laqueur, *A History of Terrorism* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2001) and Andrew Sinclair, *An Anatomy of Terror: A History of Terrorism* (London: Macmillan, 2003).

reduced to the impact it generates.<sup>182</sup> This discord is encapsulated well by Alex Schmid and Albert Jongman's mammoth compilation of data and studies on the phenomenon of terrorism, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories, & Literature*, whose title itself demonstrates that any attempt to understand the concept must take into consideration a dizzying array of variables, spanning a variety of disciplines. The work draws from hundreds of experts in the field of terrorism studies, examines reports of events from around the globe and throughout history, and includes a 200-page-long bibliography with nearly 6,000 entries of other works about terrorism, definitions, studies, and incidences. Yet even this systematic approach ultimately yields ambiguity: at the outset the authors admit that "the search for an adequate definition of terrorism is still on,"<sup>183</sup> and, at the end of a thirty-eight page "Definitions" section, they present a "working definition" of terror, based on the aggregated feedback of over one hundred reviewers:

Terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi-)clandestine individual, group, or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal, or political reasons, whereby – in contrast to assassination – the direct targets of violence are generally chosen randomly (targets of opportunity) or selectively (representative or symbolic targets) from a target population, and serve as message generators. Threat- and violence-based communication processes between terrorist (organization), (imperiled) victims, and main targets are used to manipulate the main target (audience(s)), turning it into a target of terror, a target of demands, or a target of attention, depending on whether intimidation, coercion, or propaganda is primarily

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<sup>182</sup> Matthew Carr, *The Infernal Machine: A History of Terrorism* (New York: New Press, 2007). 9. A brief list of other prominent contemporary works theorizing terror and terrorism includes Marc Redfield's *The Rhetoric of Terror: Reflections on 9/11 and the War on Terror* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009); Bruce Hoffman's *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Alex Houen's *Terrorism and Modern Literature, from Joseph Conrad to Ciaran Carson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); *Terrorism and Narrative Practice*, eds. Thomas Austenfeld, Dimiter Daphinoff, and Jens Herlth (Zurich: Lit Verlag, 2011); Terry Eagleton's *Holy Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and W.J.T. Mitchell's *Cloning Terror* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>183</sup> Alex Schmid and Albert Jongman, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Databases, Theories, & Literature* (New York: Transaction Publishers, 2005). 1.

sought.<sup>184</sup>

As is readily apparent, this definition is so broad as to be virtually meaningless; under its unwieldy organizational schema, nearly anything can be defined as “terror.” Furthermore, it is telling that even this attempt at clarification is immediately followed by a list of thirty-three “Unsolved Conceptual Problems of Terrorism.”<sup>185</sup>

However, all of these definitions largely ignore the psychological aspects of terror, the ways in which it affects both observer and, crucially, participant. While certainly all of these definitions and understandings are in play when talking about terror, this chapter will largely follow the conceptualization advanced by Anthony Kubiak in his *Stages of Terror* (1991), which connects understandings of terror with its inherently theatrical nature. The terror defined by Kubiak does not take one single form; rather, it is composed of a variety of mutually interactive forces and features that together constitute the concept. Terror is, at its core, more than simply “frightful” or “horrifying,” or even “painful;” it describes an existential state in which observers or audience members fundamentally cannot engage with what is before them: as Kubiak argues, “we are faced with a paradox, however, because in performance what cannot be articulated must be shown, and when it is shown, it ceases to be what it was. Thus when terror enters the information systems of performance, it ceases, in a sense, to be terror – which is unspeakable, and unrepresentable – and becomes a mask of itself.”<sup>186</sup>

Kubiak’s use of the term “mask” is particularly provocative – terror is that which cannot be displayed because it is too awful to process, but can only be presented through a proxy that simultaneously maintains the evidence of its

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid, 29-31.



hiddenness and the falseness of its representation. It exists outside of the standard signifying system and therefore can only be talked *about* or *around*, not directly *of*.<sup>187</sup> As Geoffrey Galt Harpham notes, however, “Terror... is not trauma”<sup>188</sup> (although the two are intimately related); it is distinct from that which re-enacts itself or acts itself out through a variety of systems of representation – instead, it is precisely the void that can be recognized only by the absent space that it creates. Similarly, Jacques Lezra suggests that “to be terrified is to lack both fear and anxiety: to be in terror is to be without an object one can reckon with and without a time one can assess.”<sup>189</sup> Describing the state of terror, he goes on to observe that “here thought thinks through, experiences, is responsible for and to, and guards the failure of the objectality of objects (things become other things, or their borders become unfixed and encroach upon others, on oneself), the failure of the discreteness (the calculability, the regularity, the spatiality) of being in time, the rough closure of concepts (whose borders also become unfixed and irregular).”<sup>190</sup> He portrays the state of terror (and I use the word “state” here with reference both to status and to a legal-political entity) as not only one in which the individual is paralyzed or overwhelmed, but in which the very form of experience, or, more broadly constituted, that of the text itself, is altered, broken down, and dismantled, its boundaries collapsed and formed anew. As Julie Stone Peters observes, the words “terror” and “territory” are etymologically linked,

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<sup>186</sup> Anthony Kubiak, *Stages of Terror: Terrorism, Ideology, and Coercion as Theatre History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). 11.

<sup>187</sup> Hence, a corollary is that terror is always extrajudicial, existing fundamentally outside of the systems of the law, and is therefore related to theorizations of sovereignty such as those articulated by Carl Schmitt in *Political Theology* and *The Concept of the Political*. As this exceptionalism poses a threat to preexisting systems of power, it is unsurprising that states often co-opt the deployment of terror for their own ends in an attempt to contain its effects.

<sup>188</sup> Geoffrey Galt Harpham, “Symbolic Terror” in *Critical Inquiry*, 28:2 (Winter 2002), 573-579. 573.

<sup>189</sup> Jacques Lezra, *Wild Materialism: The Ethic of Terror and the Modern Republic* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010). 26.

while W. J. T. Mitchell observes that “terrorists do not occupy territory;” their capacity to induce terror is contingent upon their being everywhere and nowhere at once, of not being delimited into a specific place in which they might be contained by national or geographical limitations.<sup>191</sup> Similarly, Marc Redfield notes that by referring to events such as the catastrophe of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 as “9/11,” we efface their year, and thus remove from them the finality of temporal closure – they can, and may, happen again and again in the future, at any unknown point: “when we add the year, we fix the date in calendrical history; when we omit it we obtain the vibrant urgency of a date that recurs, that insists on its recurrence.”<sup>192</sup> Terror, and terrorism, gain their effectiveness and power precisely through this lack of definition: the goal of terror-causing acts, insofar as they can be said to have a single one, is to create a climate in which everyone feels at risk all of the time. The sheer randomness of acts of terrorism and terror – blowing up a bus, gassing a subway, or poisoning a water supply – universalizes them; it creates a panopticon effect in which everyone feels that they could be targeted at any moment, in any way, despite the relatively tiny number of actual terrorist acts. As Mitchell observes, “the point of terrorist violence is not the killing of the enemy as such, but the terrorizing of the enemy with a traumatizing spectacle.”<sup>193</sup> The effect generated is one of an omnipresent “Terror of the Unknown” – a non-specific sense that “something” could happen at any time, causing constant, unremitting uncertainty. However, as soon as this concept becomes

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid, 27-28.

<sup>191</sup> Julie Stone Peters, “A ‘Bridge over Chaos’: *De Jure Belli, Paradise Lost*, Terror, Sovereignty, Globalism, and the Modern Law of Nations” in *Comparative Literature*, 57:4 (Autumn, 2005), 273-293. 288; W. J. T. Mitchell, “The Unspeakable and the Unimaginable: Word and Image in a Time of Terror” in *English Literary History*, 72: 2 (Summer, 2005), 291-308. 299.

<sup>192</sup> Marc Redfield, *The Rhetoric of Terror: Reflections on 9/11 and the War on Terror* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009). 19.

<sup>193</sup> Mitchell, 298.

grounded in a specific act, it loses a measure of its conceptual and experiential power: thus, terror has to continually change its shape in order to remain potent, since once it is defined its subjects can begin to regain a level of normalcy, and it begins to erode. Terror maintains its force by being the untargetable, the undefinable, the unknown, and by occupying the space just outside of certainty.

Kubiak takes Percy Shelley's *The Cenci* as a case study of terror within Romantic drama, arguing that

the central infraction in *The Cenci*, presumably incest, is never spoken. The entire text of the play, in fact, operates as an attempted secondary process by which "the crime" is triangulated and approached asymptotically, but never apprehended... Finally, the "unspeakable crime" is unspeakability itself, the unrepresentable that desires and repudiates its image at the heart of the play... Thus Manfred and Beatrice Cenci are unable to pronounce the crime, not because of its heinousness, but because the crime is *the failure of speaking-consciousness itself*, which can only be expressed as silence.<sup>194</sup>

Terror is that which cannot be articulated; the moment that it is defined or quantified, it loses its central quality. As such, terror can paradoxically only be represented (or, in some sense, staged) through an emptiness that is always felt, a vacuum of experience whose content cannot be identified. Kubiak's terror is therefore related to Burke's conception of the sublime, which, as distinguished from the beautiful, is that which is defined by its very position outside of the realm of comprehension. Burke writes that "the passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence

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<sup>194</sup> *Stages of Terror*, 97, 106; emphasis in original.

reason on that object which employs it.”<sup>195</sup> In the same way, we can posit by implication that Count Cenci has committed incest with his daughter, but, like the characters in the play, we can never pin down with absolute precision exactly what is the unstated crime. The centrality of the unspoken (and unspeakable) act, being “at the heart of the play,” is linked to this absence: the object of terror is foregrounded, even as it is removed.

I would also extend Kubiak’s formulation to insist that terror is ultimately undefinable even to ourselves, that which we cannot account for within our own minds. It obliterates our sense-making capacities and inhibits the act of thinking itself, both in the moment in which it is initially encountered, and in the memory of the experience. Such a reading of terror draws on similar theorizations by both Elaine Scarry and Alan Richardson. Scarry argues that, as an experience that is fundamentally inexpressible to others and incomprehensible when we ourselves are not actively feeling it, pain has the potential to “unmake” the world around us.<sup>196</sup> Pain produces the isolation of the sufferer, but also of the observer – it is not only that we cannot communicate our own painful experiences, but we also fail to empathize on a radical level with those who are actually experiencing pain, even when we recognize intellectually that they are feeling it. Like pain in Scarry’s analysis, terror is fundamentally isolating: it disengages us from our standard cognitive state and cuts us off from the ability to make sense of what is going on; we do not think, only feel, and at times not even that. Those affected by terror can no more articulate their

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<sup>195</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: George Bell, 1889). 40; emphasis in original. Burke also writes that “indeed terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime” (41).

<sup>196</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). 3-7.

experiences to others than can someone in the depths of physical or mental agony. Similarly, Alan Richardson suggests what he terms the “neural sublime” as a way to read texts from the Romantic period. He defines the neural sublime as “moments when, through sensory or emotional or conceptual overload, or some combination of all three, the mind blanks out and seems to undergo a physical collapse or meltdown.”<sup>197</sup> Terror causes an analogous “blank” or “meltdown,” yet rather than overwhelming the observer or participant, which implies excess, terror generates its effects primarily because of its *evacuation* of a stable definition – the inability of those who are experiencing terror to articulate precisely what the threat or horror before them even is. Thus, terror can be compared analogously (since metaphor is the only way to effectively apprehend that which cannot be defined directly) to a black hole: it cannot be viewed itself, but can only be known by its effects.<sup>198</sup> In order to examine terror, one must therefore take an indirect approach, attending to the ways in which terror’s presence alters the text itself, and even its surrounding elements – terror refuses to remain confined within the boundaries of the text as they are traditionally defined, but infuses the peripheral elements as well.

This chapter will take Inchbald’s play *The Massacre* as a case study in charting terror as it is thus defined, one that I argue is emblematic of the workings of terror as a whole. Because the chapter posits as one of its axioms that terror cannot be examined directly, it will instead explore terror’s effects by following a pattern of “outward”

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<sup>197</sup> Alan Richardson, *The Neural Sublime: Cognitive Theories and Romantic Texts* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010). 31.

<sup>198</sup> That is, while acts of terror or terrorism are very visible in a sense, I am arguing that it is only their aftershocks or repercussions which obtain such high visibility (therefore connecting them to media distribution); while the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, for example, were endlessly repeated on news and television outlets, the actual occurrence of death itself was very quickly censored, and the media abstained from showing it directly in favor of verbal description such as quoting death tolls.

movement: it will start with the traces of terror found in the immediate text of the play, then progressively expand to encompass those manifestations within its preface and footnotes, and will finally discuss the broader socio-political climate of its composition. Doing so reveals the ways in which the mechanisms of terror permeate these multiple planes, and how *The Massacre* draws attention to, and itself deploys, the logic of terror.

The dramaturgy and characters of the text are perhaps the aspect of the text most affected by the mechanisms of terror. Within the play, characters pass from one state of terror to another: the Tricastins are pursued throughout by the angry mob that is always just behind them; even when captured, the family desperately awaits judgment on the status of their lives. Eusèbe in particular is haunted by the memory of the horrors he has witnessed in Paris: he describes having been knocked unconscious, and, when his senses returned to him,

I put out my arms to embrace my fellow sufferers, I found I clasped nothing but dead bodies. – I rose from the horrid pile, and by a lamp discerned (all gashed with wounds) faces, that but a few hours before I had seen shine with health and benevolence. – Rushing from the ghastly scene, I fled, I knew not where, about the town – my sword in my hand, reeking with blood, my hair disheveled, and my frantic features caused me to be taken for one of the murderers, so I passed unmolested, once more to see the dearer part of my family. – But am I with them? really with them? My ideas are confused. – Poor helpless victims of ferocious vengeance, pale, convulsed with terror, and writhing under the ruffian's knife, pursue and surround me. – Am I, am I with my living family?<sup>199</sup>

Eusèbe's monologue is packed with uncertainty and unrecognizability. The members of the mob mistake the victim for one of their own, as he has taken on the appearance of a murderer rather than the object of their search; the horror of the act has made him

indistinguishable with those from whom he is fleeing. Running without purpose, he “fled, I knew not where,” unable to process his surroundings. When Eusèbe finally does emerge from the living death of unconsciousness, in which he is taken for a corpse by the mob, he at first cannot tell whether those around him are alive or dead. Even after embracing only “dead bodies,” he continues to search with the lamp, only to find that he is the sole survivor, drawing his own existence into question due to its close association with the dead. The narration itself is shaped by the terror of its content: even by the end of the passage, Eusèbe remains unsure whether he is with the living or not, repeating his refrain of “am I with them? really with them?... Am I, am I with my living family?,” still unconvinced that he has survived. He continues to be “pursue[d]” and “surround[ed]” by the unnamed victims, inhabiting simultaneously two times and places, unable to discern whether the event is over, or still taking place. He can neither escape from, nor directly confront, the source of his terror, but must persist within the confused and helpless state in which he can only attempt to flee, although never successfully, from the specter that haunts him.

In a related scene, Eusèbe is very nearly mistaken for his father. As the mob enters the apartments of the Tricastin family, Eusèbe’s father stays behind on the pretense that he will plead for their lives. Instead, he attempts to convince the leader of the mob that he is actually his son. He twice insists that “I am” the man, and when questioned further, says “I know not who, my friends, just at this time, would willingly put himself in the place of him you ask for.”<sup>200</sup> When the inquisitors ask him why he looks older, and why his hair should be grey at such a young age, he replies

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<sup>199</sup> *The Massacre*, 7. We might compare these lines with an echo from *The Prelude* in which the poet is also experiencing the uncomfortable nearness of death, when the drowned schoolmaster “bolt upright / Rose with his ghastly face.”

that “care” and “fright” have aged him prematurely.<sup>201</sup> It is only the appearance of Eusèbe himself that ruins the plan, giving the mob a visual point of comparison that dispels the father’s attempt at illusion.

Terror in these instances renders the characters unable to understand a referent; it does not simply confuse, but makes recognition impossible and obliterates it, shutting down the capacity for comprehension. It is this cognitive disruption that renders Eusèbe unable to understand that he has escaped from the massacres at Paris. Since we cannot conceive of the terrible object, or the object of terror, directly, the only way that we can approach it is through metaphorical substitution of the type attempted by the elder Eusèbe for his son. It therefore functions as the kind of “mask of itself” that Kubiak describes. The failure of the elder Eusèbe’s ruse points toward the visibility of the mask *as* a mask, the way that the absence of the horrible event – in this case the near-certain death awaiting whomever is identified as Eusèbe – never fully effaces its presence *as* absence. Because of this feature of terror, the drama repeatedly draws attention to the inefficacy of language.<sup>202</sup> Tricastin’s attempt to persuade the bloodthirsty mob to take him instead of his son fails, and results in both being taken prisoner; Eusèbe’s endless – painfully so – discussions with his wife about whether she should stay or flee, and his constant deferment of his family’s escape, only cause her and her children to be captured as well; even the final rhetorical exchange between Eusèbe and Glandève, which seems to prove the power of rational

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid, 12-13.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>202</sup> Significantly, after flaring up in the 1790’s, usage of the term “terror” in print dropped precipitously during the next thirty years, until it started trickling back into popular vocabulary in the 1830’s. It wasn’t until nearly a century later, in 1883, that the word began to be used in anything other than a decidedly serious sense (e.g. “holy terror” or “that child is a terror”). It is as if the weight of terror affects even the ability of the lexicon to contain it, the vividness of the events making it nearly impossible to directly express the word that would define them.



language to overcome biased emotions and groupthink, is ultimately demonstrated to be impotent when the bodies of Madame Tricastin and her children are carried in, revealing that they had been murdered offstage during the same time as the discussion took place. Rather than resulting in enlightenment or freedom, their extended rhetorical exchange actually occurs simultaneously with the massacre of the debater's wife and children.

Simultaneously, terror operates within the text of the play to generate the unnatural, that which exists fundamentally outside of ordinary experience. Perhaps the most famous lines in *The Massacre* are those in which Eusèbe describes the horrors he witnessed in Paris, in which "I saw poor females, youths, and helpless infants try to ward off the last fatal blow, then sink beneath it... I saw infants, encouraged by the fury of their tutors, stab other infants sleeping in their cradles."<sup>203</sup> That the infants are "taught" how to engage in such violence connects them with a larger system of signification, yet at the same time Eusèbe's description places the events outside of the realm of normal occurrence; their exceptionality and unnaturalness renders them even more potent, and in some sense even beyond comprehension. Women are among the most prominent instigators of this "unnatural" and destabilizing behavior in the text, as the play shows the impossibility of the traditional separation of the public and domestic spheres. As early as October of 1789, women had been perceived as equal instigators of revolutionary bloodshed, often behaving with even more animosity and bloodlust than their male peers; consider, for example, the etching *Female Furies or Extraordinary Revolution*:

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<sup>203</sup> *The Massacre*, 7. The imagery here may also recall Jean-François Ducis' 1783 French translation of *Macbeth*. In this version, the pivotal moment occurs when Lady Macbeth stabs her infant son in his cradle while sleepwalking.



(Figure 8; © Trustees of the British Museum)

The print, which depicts women assaulting the palace at Versailles to bring the King and Queen to Paris, focuses on the brutality of the scene: note the heads being carried on pikes, as well as the beheading actively taking place in the lower left of the image. The mass of women completely overwhelms the guards; not only are those in the foreground causing the male defenders to retreat, but there are even more coming in from the hills in the background. We might read such an emphasis on the fear of women decapitating men as the manifestation of an anxiety over social upheaval: by unnaturally taking on the male role of soldier and perpetrator of violence during a political revolution, women are severing the “head” of the family/state from its body, disrupting the natural hierarchy. Later English imaginings of revolutionary women would translate this violence into the home: James Gillray’s *Un Petit Souper a la Parisienne – or – A Family of Sans-Culotts refreshing after the fatigues of the day* (September 1792) graphically portrays women as cannibalistically feasting on the remains of their enemies:



Recalling *The Massacre*'s reference to seeing "infants, encouraged by the fury of their tutors, stab other infants sleeping in their cradles," the image inverts the idea of women as nurturers of children: here, they are not only actively roasting an infant, but have abandoned their own, leaving them to imitate their parents' cannibalism. The women in the setting are barely recognizable as such; they have become little more than fiendish, starving monsters whom the revolution has deprived of both food and maternal instinct. Wendy Nielsen's observation that in the contemporary newspaper accounts of the violence coming out of France "women and children were not only victims but also perpetrators of violence" holds true here as well; note that of the two

bodies in the lower right-hand corner, one is female.<sup>204</sup> This reversal repositions women, like the murderous infants, away from the role of object of care to that of agent of violence.

*The Massacre* conspicuously attempts to forbid women (or, at least, aristocratic ones) from entering into this role, however, with Eusèbe declaring that “so sacred do I hold the delicacy of her sex, that could she with a breath lay all our enemies dead, I would not have her feminine virtues violated by the act.”<sup>205</sup> The stress between these two extremes, of women as direct agents of violence and as absolutely removed from it, has terrible consequences in the text, since by preventing women from defending themselves, men paradoxically put them in even greater danger: Daniel O’Quinn has argued that by forcing women to remain within the “safe space” of the domestic sphere, *The Massacre* ultimately exposes them to fatal violence.<sup>206</sup> For example, the repeated (and prolonged) attempts of Eusèbe and his father to protect their wives and children from having to confront, or even see, their pursuers actually gives the mob time to overtake them. By breaking down these gender spaces and divisions, the play both produces the impossible, and forces readers to see the impossible binds that exist within traditional gender expectations, with their disastrous results.

In the same way that terror’s effects bleed over from the text into the experience of the reader, the displacing mechanisms of terror are not confined to the

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<sup>204</sup> Nielsen, 279-280. This idea, however, was not the only perspective of revolutionary women; consider, for example, the numerous counter-narratives that depicted Marie Antoinette as a devoted wife and mother, such as Burke’s famous account in the *Reflections*.

<sup>205</sup> *The Massacre*, 10.

<sup>206</sup> Daniel O’Quinn, “Elizabeth Inchbald’s *The Massacre*: Tragedy, Violence and the Networks of Political Fantasy,” *British Women Playwrights Around 1800*, 14 September 2012, <[http://www.etang.umontreal.ca/bwp1800/essays/oquinn\\_massacre.html#Anchor4](http://www.etang.umontreal.ca/bwp1800/essays/oquinn_massacre.html#Anchor4)>.

lines of *The Massacre* itself, but also operate within its preface, footnotes, and even fraught publication history. Although it is possible for characters in the play to describe what is taking place in various ways, the events themselves never actually appear before the audience: the massacres in Paris are only retold by Eusèbe, not represented directly; the death of Madame Tricastin and her children takes place entirely offstage, and in fact the reader does not even know it is happening until it has already occurred. By also locating terror within these seemingly peripheral elements, the play provides a powerful demonstration of its transcendent and boundary-blurring qualities; in placing terror within the margins, just outside of the perceivable realm, the play denies its audience the ability to engage with it directly, rendering the traces of its presence even more hauntingly unsettling.

The shadow of this removal begins to loom even before the text of the play itself begins. In her Preface to the work, Inchbald explains why it was never produced onstage by quoting Horace Walpole's postscript to his recent play *The Mysterious Mother* (1791), professing that she, like Walpole, believed that the work would never be "proper to appear on the stage. The subject is so horrid, that I thought it would shock, rather than give satisfaction, to an audience."<sup>207</sup> While several critics have pointed toward Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *Jean Henuyer, or the Bishop of Lizieux* (1773) as a source-text for *The Massacre*,<sup>208</sup> none have explored Inchbald's explicit attention to Walpole's drama, written just one year earlier. But her reference to *The Mysterious Mother* is more than passing: it points toward a deeper connection between the unspeakable crime of incest at the core of Walpole's play and the unspeakable

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<sup>207</sup> *The Massacre*, 1.



violence within *The Massacre*. It is therefore worth a brief examination of the only text to which Inchbald directly refers in the play.

*The Mysterious Mother* begins with Edmund, Count of Narbonne, returning to his homeland after sixteen years of exile. He had been banished by his mother, the Countess, for having a sexual affair with a maid on the same night that his father had died.<sup>209</sup> He has recently returned to Narbonne because he believes that his mother is being manipulated by duplicitous local clerics: she has eschewed all worldly pleasures since his absence, living a life of isolation, poverty, and self-abasement. However, when he arrives, he finds that her torments are self-imposed, and stem from a guilt which she refuses to name, even to the priests attending her. While in Narbonne seeking to make contact with his mother, Edmund falls in love with Adeliza, an orphan in his mother's care. He finally appears in front of his mother and declares his loyalty, yet rather than being grateful to see her son, she is horrified and rushes out. The next day Edmund and Adeliza are secretly wed; when the Countess discovers this, she is disgusted, and in horror reveals that sixteen years ago, after hearing of her husband's death and his son's planned liaison with his maid, she, overwhelmed by "the storm of disappointed passions,"<sup>210</sup> snuck into Edmund's chambers, switched places with the maid, and committed incest with her son; Adeliza is the result of their union, thus making her Edmund's sister-daughter-wife.<sup>211</sup> The horror of this action overwhelms all involved: the Countess kills herself with a dagger, Adeliza goes to

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<sup>208</sup> This source is identified by both George Taylor (*The French Revolution and the London Stage, 1789-1805* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000). 99) and Wendy Nielsen ("A Tragic Farce," 2006).

<sup>209</sup> Intriguingly, Edmund's original romantic interest is named Beatrice; given the play's theme of incest, this raises the possibility that it may have been an influence on Percy Shelley's later work on the same subject, *The Cenci* (1819).

<sup>210</sup> *The Mysterious Mother: A Tragedy* ([Publisher's name indecipherable in text]: London, 1791). 80.

<sup>211</sup> We might conceive of this triangulated configuration as a gesture toward a kind of "Unholy Trinity."

spend the rest of her life in a convent, and Edmund flees his homeland, never to return.

The relationship between Walpole's drama and *The Massacre* lies in their shared interest with the unspeakable: *The Mysterious Mother*'s primary focus is on the inability of the characters, or the drama itself, to pinpoint the central, unnamed sin until the play's final scenes (to the extent that the title itself centers, literally and figuratively, on the adjective "Mysterious"). When the sin finally is revealed, it is too much for the characters to bear, and the drama must sacrifice the Countess to excise its horror. Just as the monk Martin asks her "What is this secret sin, this untold tale, / That art cannot extract, nor penance cleanse?," so the inarticulate crimes of the Terror described in *The Massacre*, especially those against women, cannot be forgiven, cannot be "cleansed," since the scope of their damage can never fully be defined.<sup>212</sup> Any attempt to represent their total impact can only serve to limit them, so the texts articulate these gaps by compulsively orbiting them over and over again. Both plays acknowledge the inexpressibility of the acts that are paradoxically their central focus, and both plots circle the act of naming the central word that is their subject – for Walpole, incest; for Inchbald, the Terror/terror – without ever actually doing so. Simultaneously, in order to map out these un-nameable elements, both works must, and indeed can only, describe the process of the subject's *removal*. Indeed, the experience of both of these plays is not a cathartic expurgation of feeling, but the "shock" that Walpole describes and Inchbald references, the inability to derive pleasure or meaning from the events described. This effect in *The Massacre* is further generated by the act of citation, of having recourse to another's words (which are themselves a postscript, existing outside of traditional textual boundaries) in order to

find expression, and creating an additional step of removal from the object of terror. Hence the play's historical displacement as well; Inchbald cannot describe or confront the terrible events directly, so she has to resort to another time and place. The fact that the play is a translation – not simply copied, but, as the title page declares, “*Taken from the French*” – signals its violent wrenching away from another author and language, an abduction from its proper location.<sup>213</sup> Through her use of these citational mechanisms, Inchbald demonstrates the inability of the text itself to fully encompass the horror of the events she describes.

The play's production history is likewise defined, in the same way as this citationality, by a process of violent removal. Although Inchbald explicitly disavowed the play's stageability as described above, she apparently had no such qualms about the possibility of its being published in print, and presented it to the Robinson publishing house of London shortly after finishing the manuscript in the winter of 1792. While they initially agreed to publish it, and even began an initial print run, very soon afterward they withdrew their offer and ceased production. While there is no explicit documented evidence providing the reasons for this abrupt reversal in the publishing house's records, or in Inchbald's own diaries or letters, the Robinsons presumably came to believe that any profits the work might potentially earn would be outweighed by the damage done to their reputation for publishing something of such a contentious nature.<sup>214</sup> Given the close personal relationship that Inchbald had long

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>213</sup> *The Massacre*, 1, my emphasis. For an excellent discussion of the politics of translation and representation in Inchbald's corpus as a whole, see Jane Moody's “Suicide and translation in the dramaturgy of Elizabeth Inchbald and Anne Plumptre” in *Women in British Romantic Theatre: Drama, Performance, and Society, 1790-1840*, ed. Catherine Burroughs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>214</sup> Annibel Jenkins, *I'll Tell You What: The Life of Elizabeth Inchbald* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2003). 319.



enjoyed with the members of the Robinson family (of whom the father and his two sons comprised the entirety of the company),<sup>215</sup> and the commercial success that publishing a work by a well-known and highly regarded novelist and playwright such as Inchbald would almost surely have brought, their slighting of the play indicates the severity of the backlash that they must have assumed its publication would meet. This reversal, of beginning to be printed, but then being pulled back at the last moment, is emblematic of the workings of terror within the play as a whole: it is fundamentally a destabilizing force that affects every aspect of the text, pulling everything around it in opposing directions, with the result that each element is at odds with itself.

Even in terms of genre, *The Massacre* refuses to settle into an easily identifiable category. As a closet drama, it foregrounds its own identity as simultaneously a play (with this genre's associations with staging, performance, and spectatorship), and a text meant to be read. Reading closet dramas of this type, one is constantly pulled between the text's dual existence on the stage and the page, and the drama refuses to settle into and firmly inhabit either. At the same time, the movement to the closet is always a meaningful act; Catherine Burroughs has argued that closet plays should be read "not as *failed* plays (or ones that happened *not* to have been produced) but – instead – as intentional responses to their historical moment."<sup>216</sup> The genre inherently raises the specter of staging, while conspicuously foregrounding its unwillingness to place its subject matter before a theatrical audience. The form contains within itself anxious vacillation and instability; as such, closet drama is the ideal medium for representing the unsettling terror that is the play's focus.

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid, 319.

Terror thus operates as a dislocating force in *The Massacre*, pushing itself into the margins around what is traditionally defined as “text,” while simultaneously shifting those elements that are nominally the central forces that should produce terror – the events of the Terror itself – into the dim periphery of allusion and elliptical description after the fact; in the process, it resists ready identification. The text refuses to depict the terrible acts it would describe because their very nature belies representation; to portray them would be to give voice only to a lesser version of the horrors of their trauma, to undercut their impact, both on their participants and for the audience. Instead, the only way to stage them is, paradoxically, to *not* stage them, to de-stage them, to make their effects known by the process of wrenching them away from view, and to place the subject of terror outside of the visual realm and into the imaginative by locating it at the margins of the text.<sup>217</sup> Terror is the unrecognizable, the unknown, and the unknown is always the greatest terror.

Taking one final step “outward,” to the social and cultural conditions surrounding *The Massacre*’s production, reveals the ways in which the play sheds

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<sup>216</sup> Catherine Burroughs, “The Persistence of Closet Drama: Theory, History, Form” in *The Performing Century: Nineteenth-Century Theatre’s History*, ed. Tracy Davis and Peter Holland (New York: Palgrave, 2007). 216; emphasis in original.

<sup>217</sup> In his 1811 essay “On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to Their Fitness for Stage Representation,” Charles Lamb discusses the failings of attempts at staging the witches of *Macbeth*: “Contrary to the old saying, that ‘seeing is believing,’ the sight actually destroys the faith; and the mirth in which we indulge at their expense, when we see these creatures upon a stage, seems to be a sort of indemnification which we make to ourselves for the terror which they put us in when reading made them an object of belief, – when we surrendered up our reason to the poet, as children to their nurses and their elders; and we laugh at our fears, as children, who thought they saw something in the dark, triumph when the bringing in of a candle discovers the vanity of their fears. For this exposure of supernatural agents upon a stage is truly bringing in a candle to expose their own delusiveness. It is the solitary taper and the book that generates a faith in these terrors: a ghost by chandelier light, and in good company, deceives no spectators... Spirits and fairies cannot be represented, they cannot even be painted, – they can only be believed” (Charles Lamb, *The Works of Charles Lamb in Five Volumes*, vols. 4 and 5 (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1882). 98-99). Although we might disagree with Lamb’s overall appraisal of Shakespeare as suffering irremediably in the act of being staged, his articulation of the ways in which what lurks just outside of the scope of vision is more evocative of terror than that which is seen directly accords with the conception of terror presented in *The Massacre*.

light on the operations of terror within English theatrical culture at large: if the unknown is that which is most terrifying, that which evokes the most acute paralysis of the cognitive capabilities and must therefore be contained and circumscribed as fully as possible, then playwrights of the Romantic period produced this same kind of anxious effect on their contemporary society. Indeed, the logic of terror which undergirds the play also runs as a current throughout the social and political climate of the Romantic period as a whole – by employing drama to highlight the unspeakability of the violence of the Terror, especially as it is enacted upon women, *The Massacre* draws this parallel to the forefront. In the play, the only way to express terror is through metaphor, hyperbole, and substitution; since terror itself is the archetypal example of excess, of the disruption of the “normal” by a singular experience, it is only appropriate that depictions of it engage in a similar form of metaphorical overflow, changing the very landscape of expression with which they interact, in the ways I have detailed above. Without victimizing these figures, one may say that Romantic playwrights, especially women, were subject to permeating social binds which placed them in a state akin to that produced by terror, and that as such the best way of representing their position is through a drama of terror such as *The Massacre*.

Indeed, a component of the play’s refusal to articulate the term “terror” or to speak of the Terror directly lies in the harsh climate of theatrical censorship that hovered over the Romantic stage. Since 1737, the Stage Licensing Act had required that all works presented before the public first be approved by the Examiner of Plays, who had the power to alter or delete individual lines or scenes, or even to exclude plays as a whole from staging. John Larpent, the Examiner during the majority of the Romantic period, ferociously censored any drama with even faint political overtones,

either liberal or conservative, on the grounds that such plays could provoke dissent, threaten the peace, or lead to rioting.<sup>218</sup> Furthermore, only two theaters in London, Drury Lane and Covent Garden (and the Haymarket during the summer), were given royal permission to stage productions featuring dialogue; all other public venues were restricted to performing pantomime, mime shows, or farce, works deemed less likely to have political impact.<sup>219</sup> Political or contentious subjects could be discussed or written about openly, but not enacted before the public eye.<sup>220</sup> Playwrights, male or female, were therefore compelled to turn to indirect, circuitous methods for representing that which could not be brought before the audience directly.

The most tightly regulated subject kept off the Romantic stage was doubtlessly the French Revolution, the (non-)focus of Inchbald's play. In a sense, we may view Revolutionary France as a whole as acting as a "theater" for England: the English audience watched anxiously the moves of the revolutionaries and royals, attempting to interpret the action on the "stage" of the continent and see how its drama would unfold. Edmund Burke, ultimately the Revolution's most vocal opponent, would himself describe the events in theatrical terms: his first written response, in a letter to Lord Charlemont on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1789, expresses "astonishment at the wonderful spectacle which is exhibited in a Neighbouring and rival country – what Spectators,

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<sup>218</sup> Although this last concern may seem inflated, the raising of ticket prices at the Covent Garden Theatre in 1809 would provoke the O.P. (Old Price) Riots, a tense standoff which closed down the theater for 72 days; significantly, the riots began during a performance of *Macbeth*, a drama representing the death of a king, overtly marking out their potential political impact.

<sup>219</sup> For a discussion of the impact of this censorship on Romantic drama as a whole, see David Worrall's *Theatrical Revolution: Drama, Censorship and Romantic Period Subcultures, 1773-1832* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). For an examination of the ways that productions from minor, non-patent, and otherwise-"illegitimate" theaters also shaped the theatrical climate of the Romantic period, see Jane Moody's *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>220</sup> The fact that there was no such censorship apparatus in place for printed articles underscores the perceived privileged position of drama for social disruption.

and what actors,” and in his *Reflections* he asserts that “In viewing this monstrous tragi-comic scene, the most opposite passions necessarily succeed, and sometimes mix with each other in the mind; alternate contempt and indignation; alternate laughter and tears; alternate scorn and horror.”<sup>221</sup> The latter passage neatly captures the divided nature of this theater: the Revolution at once filled its English audience with hope and fear, joy and remorse, and at times both of these emotions at once. English revolutionaries looked at the events taking place across the channel in anticipation; government loyalists viewed the same events with trepidation – both watched intently to see how the Revolution would “play out,” the results of an experiment being performed on a grand scale, and whether it would carry over to English shores. Burke’s use of the theatrical metaphor<sup>222</sup> is particularly apt, since it illustrates that, more than just being a proxy for a possible revolution in England, the Revolution was inherently theatrical for British audiences: watching it allowed them to observe, from a distance, a range of possibilities and outcomes fused together, a true “monstrous tragi-comic scene.”

While the Revolution was discussed daily in newspapers, before Parliament, and on the streets, however, paradoxically its events still could not be so much as alluded to in the theater without fear of prosecution. Direct insinuations about the events in France, or about parallel circumstances in England,<sup>223</sup> were effaced from the

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<sup>221</sup> Edmund Burke, *Correspondence*, eds. T.W. Copeland et al. 10 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958-1978), 6: 10. And *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L.G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). 10.

<sup>222</sup> I draw my use of this term from Betsy Bolton’s excellent book *Women, Nationalism, and the Romantic Stage: Theatre and Politics in Britain, 1780-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>223</sup> Perhaps most famously, Inchbald’s passing reference that “Provisions are so scarce!” in her play *Every One Has His Fault* (written in 1793, only one year after *The Massacre*) was perceived as a politically subversive attack on England’s ability to care for its citizens during wartime, and was subject to intense condemnation in contemporary newspapers and theatrical reviews.

stage wholly, in a way that left a conspicuous void. Yet the striking omission of this eagerly sought-after production from performance only confirmed its very horror, the indescribable quality that belies description. In the very act intended to reduce terror by preventing its display to the public, the theater paradoxically rendered it more potent. Refusing to allow the audience to see even the marginal traces of the Revolution or its impact on the stage seemed to confirm that its effects could not be defined or delimited, that it exceeded all boundaries of representation, and thus containment or control. This implicit statement is itself a form of terror, one that asserts terror's ultimate superiority over that which would describe it. Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin note that "far from containing the terror of war... sanitised footage has the potential for instilling greater anxiety and fear in viewers. Just as murky coverage of the air campaign in Iraq simultaneously distanced viewers yet drew them in, so sanitised footage of conflict invites audiences to imagine what is unseen."<sup>224</sup> By refusing to show instances of the Terror onstage, the state actually reinforced terror, importing onto its own soil the same psychological horror from which it had attempted to distance itself. In a sense, we can view the events of the Revolution as generating terror within this English "audience": the almost daily turmoil produced by the social and political upheaval prevented observers from forming a coherent narrative of the events taking place; the collapse of the established order created an uncertain future disconnected from the past. These factors came together to create an environment in which observers were denied the points of reference on which they had previously come to rely – the threat of the Revolution coming to their own shores, of this contagion of terror, was very real, and

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<sup>224</sup> *Television and Terror*, 19-20.

fundamentally destabilizing. At the moment in which it was most needed, the stage was unable to provide a way to adequately treat those subjects that belie or evade conventional representation – its attempts to provide modes of visual, physical, and even verbal expression that meaningfully address the position in which the observer is placed during events that evoke terror collapse upon themselves.

In the face of this paradox, Inchbald wrote *The Massacre*. The play not only responds to this paralysis of unrepresentability, but actively offers readers a way out of it. Crucially, the text both itself deploys the logic of terror, and also stages its use of that logic: by incorporating features of the terror which it displays back to its audience (its exclusion, removal of a referent, and cognitive disruption), Inchbald's play is able to put them on display in a way that enables the viewer to take away moral or social lessons. In effect, the play not only deploys the logic of terror itself, but simultaneously articulates how the Romantic theater as a whole operated according to this logic. By taking this most conspicuous example of Romantic censorship as its focus, the play draws into stark relief conventional theater's inability to come to terms with terror and its unrepresentability – it can neither present it onstage adequately, nor simply omit it, as doing so would be to keep silent on the most significant political issue of the period. However, *The Massacre* not only brings this structure to the forefront of the reader's awareness, but also works within it, reconfiguring the limitations of the theater as a site of potentiality of expression, and, in the process, offers a way out of this seemingly inescapable bind. Instead of remaining subject to terror's identity effacement, the play redirects it, reflecting it back onto its source. By putting on display the inability of the stage to free itself from the paradox of representation in which efforts to limit terror's effects only resulted in its

multiplication, the play also offers a third option: Inchbald employs closet drama as a medium by which terror such as that produced by the Revolution can be adequately represented. With its ability to simultaneously foreground and circumvent the paradox of representation, a closeted drama such as *The Massacre* opens up the potential for a sustained engagement – crucially, peripheral in nature – with terror itself. By conspicuously positioning itself away from the stage, declaring its disavowal of this confined space, the play draws attention to the connection between the terror which is its (non-)subject and the censorship which would have prohibited even such an indirect display. We might recall that Inchbald’s only actual audience was the select coterie of luminaries to whom she sent the text of the play, including Edmund Burke, William Godwin, and Mary Wollstonecraft; as such, Thomas Crochunis argues that *The Massacre* “exerted all the more pressure on readers such as Godwin because the unlikelihood of its being staged or published in its era raised questions about what kinds of political discourses surrounding gender and revolution were possible.”<sup>225</sup> In the process, the play demonstrates how closet drama is able to represent the unrepresentability of events such as the French Revolution, with all their terrors, in a way that theater using conventional representational techniques cannot.

Indeed, one of the ways in which the play generates this paradoxical relationship with terror, of at once presenting a subject which shuts down the capacity for cognitive processing and simultaneously seeking to use that subject to enact social change, is through its engagement with spectacle in the form of the contemporary newspaper accounts which accompanied the events of the Terror. We can recall that

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<sup>225</sup> Thomas Crochunis. “Pre- and Postrealist Dramaturgy: Women Writers, Silence, Speech, and Trauma” in *Teaching British Women Playwrights of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century*, ed.



*The Massacre* was written on the cutting edge of reports coming out of France and appearing in English newspapers, and as such sought to communicate information about the events to the English public; it is as much a newspaper report in its own right as a drama in the traditional sense. In the printed text of the play, Inchbald includes a footnote to the lines describing the horrors within Paris which states that “Shocking, even to incredulity, as these murders may appear, the truth of them has been asserted in many of our public prints during the late massacre at Paris.”<sup>226</sup> The play is a sense-making text, providing a narrative structure which aids readers in sorting out the disparate events taking place before them (and the author as well) as they have been communicated in scattered form through the newspapers: in a letter to William Godwin written while working on *The Massacre*, Inchbald notes that “I feel anxious to exculpate myself in those points where I believe it is you accuse me of trusting to newspapers for my authority. I have no other authority (no more, I believe, has half of England) for any occurrence which I do not see.”<sup>227</sup> Inchbald positions herself as a reporter, a member not only of the reading public but, by extension, of the news-gathering and -interpreting media structure. Yet, unlike a traditional news account, a play holds the potential for imaginative constructions of an event, or the potential to form narrative unencumbered by the dictum to rely solely on available information. As such, Inchbald’s play becomes a vehicle capable of conveying not only a strictly literal representation of the events, but also of exploring and giving voice to

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Bonnie Nelson and Catherine Burroughs (New York: Modern Language Association, 2010). 336-347. 343.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid, 8. For a discussion of the effect of breaking the fourth wall that Inchbald’s footnotes to the play produce, see Terence Allan Hoagwood’s “Elizabeth Inchbald, Joanna Baillie, and Revolutionary Representation in the ‘Romantic’ Period” in *Rebellious Hearts: British Women Writers and the French Revolution*, ed. Adriana Craciun and Kari Lokke (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001).

<sup>227</sup> Qtd. in Jenkins, 316.

unarticulated elements which are often silenced by journalistic representations, such as the fate of women and children, or the psychological horror which grips the citizens of a country during traumatic periods.

Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin have noted the unique ability of such public media to simultaneously promote and control terror:

News modulates terror by often simultaneously *amplifying* and *containing* representations of threat. News amplifies by inflating the seriousness of threats, by connecting a single threat to others, or by representing threats in vague, indefinite terms through speculation, linguistic imprecision, or loose use of numerical, quantitative indicators of 'terror'. Yet news also contains, by fitting new and breaking stories within prior narratives or by sanitising graphic and disturbing images of violence, bodily injury and death.<sup>228</sup>

While I have argued above that censoring disturbing elements of an event actually serves to portray them as beyond the scope of representation, and therefore even more terrible, news accounts nevertheless can use terror as a tool to influence audience reactions, rather than simply being overwhelmed by it, by constructively placing solitary events within larger narratives. We can read Inchbald's play as a whole as a sustained attempt to contextualize terror in this way. By not casting terror as an isolated incident, but instead strategically enmeshing it within a fully fleshed-out report, the playwright is able to marshal its paralyzing effects to her own ends by placing it within the larger context of a narrative which tells the story of the English theater's failure to adequately provide a means for alleviating anxieties about the rumblings of war, of the censorship which hung over the Romantic stage, and of women's containment and marginalization more broadly.

Madame Tricastin and her children being presented on a bier to her husband at

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<sup>228</sup> *Television and Terror*. 14; emphases in original.

the end of the drama is emblematic of the play's employment of narrative in this way. After seeing the bodies, Eusèbe is paralyzed by the enormity of the scene before him, standing frozen "*like a statue of horror at the sight.*"<sup>229</sup> He asks, "For what have I been preserved? Oh! night that I escaped through torrents of blood, at Paris – far, far less horrible than this day to me! Father, behold your grand-children by their mother's side, and own your son was born for greater anguish than human nature can support!," recalling the paralysis and cognitive confusion and disruption that are the hallmarks of terror, and which had also occurred, although now professedly on a somehow lesser scale, when Eusèbe had been witness to the massacres in Paris.<sup>230</sup> Yet immediately following this insistence that Eusèbe is fully incapacitated by what is before him, utterly disabled by its effects, the play provides some faint relief through his wife's dying words:

*Rochelle. [Going slowly, respectfully, and timidly up to Eusèbe.]*  
 This distraction makes me not doubt but you are the unhappy father of these infants, and husband of this lady. I was so fortunate as to be some consolation to her in her last moments, and received her parting words. The crowd had entered and encompassed your house, and she had called repeatedly for assistance before I was able to make a passage to her through the multitude:—when I did, her desire to save her life had subsided; for, she had beheld her two children slain. The eldest, to the last, she held fast by the band—the youngest she pressed violently to her bosom, and, struggling to preserve, received the murderer's blow through its breast, to her own. Tell Eusèbe (she cried as I came up) I die contented, with my children; and entreat him not to grieve at what he may think I suffered at my death; for my pain, except for him I leave behind, is trivial.

*Eusèbe.*  
 Dying saint! This was to calm my despair.<sup>231</sup>

The passage recalls an earlier moment, in which Eusèbe ran to stab the treacherous

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<sup>229</sup> *The Massacre*, 13; emphasis in original.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid*, 14; emphases in original.

Dugas, but was thwarted by Glandève, who shielded his enemy with his own body and cried “Vindictive man, hold! – Rather strike here! [*to his own breast,*] for I trust in heaven I am less unprepared to die than he.”<sup>232</sup> What for the men of the play had been only a bold statement is performed by Madame Tricastin as heroic action, with full acceptance of the consequences it entails. Significantly, Madame Tricastin is both source and balm for Eusèbe’s anguish, firmly identifying women with the capacity to generate healing out of such terrible moments, whether through a character’s action or a playwright’s narration. Her alleviation of Eusèbe’s anguish, however slight it may in reality be, points toward women’s ability to provide structure to seemingly incomprehensible moments of tragedy, even those which involve their own intense suffering. We might read the play’s declaration that she must herself die in order to provide this measure of solace as a grim statement on women’s social value.<sup>233</sup> Indeed, her death has larger social efficacy within the play as well: although in the moment of her death she is unable to repel her attackers, its narration by Rochelle leads to these figures’ capture, trial, and execution, as Glandève declares, “My friends, I conjure you to take every care that the perpetrators of this barbarous outrage are secured. This man [*to Dugas*] and his followers shall be made prisoners till our researches prove successful. – Then, the good (of all parties) will conspire to extirpate such monsters from the earth.”<sup>234</sup> By placing such terrible moments within the context of larger narration, retelling and re-articulating them, the play is ultimately able to use

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid, 13; emphasis in original.

<sup>233</sup> This is not to claim, however, that Madame Tricastin’s death is somehow justified or its tragedy negated because of the recuperative effect it produces within the surviving (notably male) characters. Rather, I am asserting that the play stages her death, as well as her ability to generate positive effects even after it through its shaping into a narrative, in order to argue for the capability of women to represent female suffering in constructive ways that nevertheless give full voice to its tragedy – as Inchbald herself does through writing *The Massacre*.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid, 14; emphasis in original.

them to gain justice and enact change for the oppressed and marginalized, especially women. The playwright herself comes to take on the role of Madame Tricastin, identifying women with the ability to both produce and alleviate terror, even while showing that doing so is often at the cost of their own sacrifice – in Inchbald’s case, of the inability of her drama to gain exposure beyond a select few readers during its own time. *The Massacre*’s employment of terror enables it to articulate and acknowledge the full scope of the atrocities it treats, even while also offering a potential amelioration of their effects, and the hope of producing more encompassing social change in the future.

I would like to close by returning to the theorizations of terror with which this chapter began. Not only do recent accounts of terror and terrorism serve as a key by which we can understand Romantic drama by women such as *The Massacre*, but, as I hope this chapter demonstrates, these plays shed light on modern terror theory as well. Theorists from such diverse backgrounds as Andrew Hoskins, Ben O’Loughlin, Jean Baudrillard, and even Walter Laqueur and Matthew Sinclair are descriptive in their appraisals of terror: whether it is an intrinsic feature of any geopolitical landscape, or a modern product of the media age, or an ontological construct without historical grounding, terror is figured as a permanent fixture of modern society, one that cannot be addressed, but only described, documented, and memorialized. However, plays such as *The Massacre* open up the prospect of a radically different kind of engagement with terror: by themselves deploying the logic of terror, these works actively enter into its semiotic system, and suggest ways for grappling with subjects that are too terrible to be represented conventionally. While *The Massacre* is certainly not directly cathartic or therapeutic in the traditional sense, it nevertheless offers possibilities for

bringing to light the unspeakable traumas of events such as the French Revolution, events which would otherwise remain wholly silent, especially their tragic consequences for women. In a sense, we can read Romantic women playwrights such as Inchbald as taking an approach to terror that may be gendered “female;” one that centers around imaginatively constructing alternative paths to engagement rather than purely documenting or witnessing its traumas after the event. These writers’ own historical moment pushed this approach to the margins, and contemporary terror theorists too often partake of the same oversight, privileging *ex post facto* discussions of terror-causing events over efforts to develop techniques for addressing the causes or effects of terror. In contrast, Michael Tomko suggests that Inchbald’s play hopes to heal psychological wounds by generating imagined cosmopolitan communities – such as between Catholics and Protestants, natives and emigrants, past and present, and France and England – that bind these elements together instead of emphasizing differences:

Pointing to the way that the public theater could serve as a place of healing exchange across sectarian and historical divides, *The Massacre* presents a venue for imagining alternative paths to modernity emphasizing, on a social level, contact and quotidian interaction among disparate groups and, on a cultural level, mutual sensitivity to wounded pasts and histories of suffering. . . . Inchbald exposes, and attempts to resist, the cultural logic of sectarian histories that prompt cycles of retributive political violence among both the oppressors and oppressed.<sup>235</sup>

Tomko’s “public theater” functions as one of the media narratives I propose as operative within the play in the preceding paragraph: both allow Inchbald to imaginatively create alternative scenarios, and to put on display elements which would otherwise be unstageable. Indeed, we might recall that in a letter to William Godwin,

Inchbald herself points to such social and moral motivations for writing the play, claiming that “it was your [Godwin’s] hinting to me that it might do harm which gave me the first idea that it might do good” and have the effect of “preventing future massacres.”<sup>236</sup> The playwright’s comment represents an insistence on the capacity for drama to intervene in those areas precisely where nothing else might. Although the idea that art can provide a way of coming to terms with terrible events, whether for the victim, participant, observer, or for society as a whole, is not new, Inchbald’s play enables the reader simultaneously to acknowledge the full scope of terror’s horror and to apprehend strategies for identifying those cultural elements by which such events continue to be produced. Consequently, in our own period, reading a text like *The Massacre* may suggest methods for coming to terms with terrorism, public violence, and other traumatizing events that belie representation elsewhere, or within other mediums. Where traditional theater fails to provide a “way out” of the bind of representation, plays like *The Massacre* step in to fill the void.

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<sup>235</sup> Michael Tomko, “Remembering Elizabeth Inchbald’s *The Massacre*: Romantic Cosmopolitanism, Sectarian History, and Religious Difference” in *European Romantic Review*, 19:1 (2008), 1-18. 2.

**“A modest virgin hath no choice”: Joanna Baillie’s *The Bride* and the Staging of  
Foreclosure**

Joanna Baillie’s *The Bride* (1828) is a strange play. It was written for a Sri Lankan audience by a playwright who sought all her life to have her works established in the English dramatic canon; it professes to bring this audience characters from its own history, yet knowingly mangles its source narratives; it seems to sympathize with the plight of its female characters, yet ultimately reifies patriarchal power; and its titular character is pivotal for every event in the drama, yet she is never named, and is effectively absent from the text except for a few brief scenes – a narrative technique almost unimaginable for a writer whose entire dramatic theory hinged on audiences forming empathic connections with the figures onstage. And yet it is precisely through being situated at the union of these paradoxes that the play is able to step outside the boundaries of contemporary dramatic representation in order to showcase the limitations of Romantic theater, and those of drama more generally. This chapter argues that *The Bride* represents an intervention in a theatrical culture in which women were faced with a double bind: if they remained offstage, they were denied a voice; simultaneously, however, their representation on it functioned to contain and circumscribe them as well. To escape this catch-22, *The Bride* develops a new strategy for combating women’s social subordination in the Romantic period: it employs a *negative* representation of its central figure, the Bride,<sup>237</sup> dramatizing the preemptive closing off, rather than the possibility, of social advancement for women on the English stage. By being conspicuously removed from the stage, as the play as a

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<sup>236</sup> Qtd. in Jenkins, 317. We might even read Inchbald’s own reappropriation of Godwin’s defamatory remarks into merits as an example of the kind of “healing” Tomko describes.



whole is from England (both physically and in subject), the Bride lays bare the subjections of English women in the Romantic theater, and the mechanisms by which drama as a whole has the potential to silence even that which it stages.

Baillie wrote *The Bride* at the prompting of Sir Alexander Johnston, a British colonial official, who suggested that she compose a drama to be translated into “Cingalese” and staged in “Ceylon” to serve for the moral improvement of the natives of the island.<sup>238</sup> Apparently spurred on by the success of her play *The Martyr* in production there two years earlier, she describes writing the play in hopes of spreading Christianity to the country’s inhabitants, and of the play being “an instrument for their [the natives’] good” by introducing to them, in dramatic form, “that leading precept of the Christian religion which distinguishes it from all other religions, the forgiveness of injuries.”<sup>239</sup> She writes that she had been led to understand that “the Natives there are very revengeful and the moral of my piece must be pointed to that, in as popular a manner for people under their circumstances as I can devise. ---- I am busy at present reading Scott’s Napoleon.”<sup>240</sup> Perhaps what is most striking about this passage is the final sentence after the dash – typically omitted in citations of the letter. It links Baillie’s attempt at religious conversion with a colonialist impulse, the Napoleonic drive to conquer and subsume surrounding cultures. The play is unabashed proselytization, with Baillie herself as a kind of missionary-playwright seeking to convert the Sri Lankans by displaying to them the merits of Christianity.

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<sup>237</sup> Although referred to in the play’s manuscript only as “the bride,” for the sake of clarity this chapter will refer to this character as “the Bride,” with capitalization.

<sup>238</sup> Joanna Baillie, *The Bride, A Drama in Three Acts* (London: Henry Colburn, 1828). iii.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid, v and viii.

<sup>240</sup> In *The Collected Letters of Joanna Baillie*, 2 vol., ed. Judith Bailey Slagle (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999). 2:601. It will be one of this essay’s axioms that while the play attempts to speak *to* the people of Sri Lanka, it says nothing *about* them, and instead can only tell us about Baillie and the cultural vantage point from which she is writing.

The play presents the story of a Sri Lankan family, and its patriarch's insatiable pursuit of a second, younger wife. Before the play begins, Rasinga, a local chieftain, saw the face of a beautiful woman after it became uncovered while he was rescuing her father from a raid by bandits, and he instantly fell in love with her. However, Rasinga's current wife, Artina, objects fiercely to the idea of sharing her position with a second woman, as does Samarkoon, Artina's brother, who also saw the woman's face during the rescue, and also desires her. Rasinga proceeds with his plans to marry the second woman despite Artina's protests, but is thwarted when Samarkoon steals her away with the help of a band of local highwaymen. After forcibly taking back the Bride and imprisoning Samarkoon and, later, Artina for trying to free her brother, Rasinga sentences both siblings to death and prepares to marry the younger woman. However, a combination of the intercession of a Spanish Christian, Dr. Juan De Creda, and the resolution of his own son, Samar, to die alongside his mother, persuades him to be merciful. The play ends with Rasinga pardoning all, embracing Christianity, forgoing his claims to the Bride, and promising her to Samarkoon. The drama is explicit in its message of Christian forgiveness, insisting that the only way to attain happiness is to show mercy toward others, and it concludes by neatly drawing together all of the plot threads.

Yet what are we to make of the titular figure herself, the Bride? As this brief summary indicates, she is largely left out of the plot and has virtually no agency in the play's events. She is not even mentioned at the conclusion, and seems all but forgotten by the text in its drive for closure. But while she is a liminal figure at the margins of the drama, hovering in the background, barely present on the stage itself and seemingly without agency, all of the play's action orbits around her. There is no

absolute requirement for the character of the Bride, since the play could plausibly advance just as well without her; yet as Catherine Burroughs notes, “although the unnamed ‘bride’ appears in only one scene where she speaks seven short lines, her body provides a powerfully erotic spectacle; and the bride’s anticipated defloration – alluded to symbolically when she keeps dropping her costume veil – dominates the thoughts of the play’s characters.”<sup>241</sup> While there are other female characters (Artina, Montebesa, and the Bride’s attendants), none are as central, while also remaining marginal, as she. Although faintly present, the Bride paradoxically occupies center stage in the drama.

Simultaneously, the Bride’s occlusion takes the form of a *de-staging* rather than a simple lack of presence – the mechanisms of the drama enact the *process* of undoing and rendering her absent. Instead of simply remaining offstage or silent, the Bride is placed on it only to be wrenched off again. Through these mechanisms of erasure the dramaturgy evacuates her of any meaningful sense of identity, leaving her a hollow being within in the play. While all of the women in the text are minimized and silenced to some degree, the process is especially foregrounded with the Bride. Most visibly, she is never named, making the bare description of her as only “The Bride” conspicuously vague. This naming, which is simultaneously a lack of naming, makes her entire identity bound up with her position relative to another subject, her husband, even as the identity of that figure is constantly changing. While it is perhaps unsurprising that the Bride is not consulted for the decision of whom she will marry, the degree to which she is transferred from Rasinga to Samarkoon, then to Rasinga

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<sup>241</sup> Catherine Burroughs, “The Erotics of Home: Staging Sexual Fantasy in British Women’s Drama,” in *Women’s Romantic Theatre and Drama: History, Agency, and Performativity*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Keir Elam (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2010). 103-122. 114.

again, and finally back to Samarkoon at the play's end, draws her status as an exchangeable commodity into striking relief (as does her telling characterization as "living treasure" by her eventual husband Samarkoon<sup>242</sup>). She is less an individual than an inanimate object that the other characters use to satisfy their own desires; of value, certainly, but only for what she can provide to those around her. Like currency, she is a placeholder for other things, without any intrinsic value herself. She cannot even choose to *whom* she is a bride; her purpose is simply to marry someone, anyone. Indeed, she is always only a "bride," never a wife or partner – she can never move beyond the position of anticipated defloration into a stable and secure identity. She is always on the cusp, precariously hovering in the liminal temporal moment between being married and unmarried. Since her defloration is always forthcoming, always tantalizingly close but never fulfilled, she remains a perpetual object of desire only, her physical consummation never taking place even at the play's end.

A pointed example of this de-staging occurs in Samarkoon's description of his love for the Bride (or, rather, "*A* bride"<sup>243</sup>):

... every female image but her own  
Is from my heart effaced, like curling mists  
That rising from the vale, cling for a while  
To the tall cliff's brown breast, till the warm sun  
Dissolves them utterly. – 'Tis so; even she  
Whom I have thought of, dreamt of, talked of, – ay,  
And talked *to*, though in absence, as a thing  
Present and conscious of my words, and living,  
Like the pure air around me, everywhere.<sup>244</sup>

The description juxtaposes the Bride with the women who previously occupied Samarkoon's heart: she is now its only inhabitant, and consumes all his thoughts,

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<sup>242</sup> *The Bride*, 53.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid*, 8, emphasis mine.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid*, 9, emphasis in text.

while they are no more than “curling mists” capable of being dissolved by the “sun” of the Bride. However, in claiming that other women’s images have been “effaced” from his heart by hers, Samarkoon sets up the precedent of female effacement and dissolution, a mechanism that may just as readily occur to the Bride herself. His use of “even she,” while emphasizing the Bride’s position as the one remaining “female image” in his heart, simultaneously functions to include her with those who have been forgotten; “even she” will be “from my heart effaced.” Indeed, his declaration that the Bride has become “Like the pure air around me” connects the simile of the Bride with that of the other lovers; she is only one step removed from becoming the “curling mists” which surround the anthropomorphized cliff’s breast, and that the sun of the next woman will dissolve in turn.<sup>245</sup> The Bride’s presence is here equated with her absence – it makes no difference whether she is physically there or not, since Samarkoon can converse equally well with his constructed version of her; the Bride is “present and conscious” in those moments when she is reconstituted from his memory or imagination (“thoughts” and “dreams”). Moreover, these moments are the only times when she actually *can* be present, since she is always talked about and around (the threefold repetition of the word “of” signals Samarkoon’s circumambulation) yet can only be talked “to” in her “absence.” Even then, she is never talked “with,” is never a participant in a conversation. The Bride is therefore both the supreme object of Samarkoon’s desire, and simultaneously as ethereal as the “*pure* air” around him; she does not exist as an individual in her own right, but only insofar as she is able to

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<sup>245</sup> The eroticism of this passage also stands out, especially the metaphor of the cliff: its “breast” is “clung” to by the “curling mists” of the lovers, delicately emphasizing the sensuous, physical undertones of Samarkoon’s desire.

sustain and define him relationally.<sup>246</sup> While she is as essential for his existence as pure air, she is just as invisible and easy to overlook. Ultimately, it is only the *idea* of her that is significant in Samarkoon's formulation; her own words do not matter, nor does her presence.

The language of the play as a whole is saturated with this rhetoric of removal. The prefix of negation "un-" (as in "undoing," "unmade," or, crucially, "unveiled") occurs forty-five times within the drama's three acts (not including the Preface, or instances such as "until"). The affix works itself into every possible setting, and is spoken by every character at least once. The cumulative effect of this rhetoric is to create an atmosphere in which events happen only to be corrected, things done only to be undone. It is not simply that actions do not exist in the play; they occur, then are negated, and their negation is co-habitant with their taking place, just as a prefix is indelibly bound with the word to which it is attached. Thus, houses are "unroof'd," words are "unheeded," chains become "unlocked," doors are "unbarred," Samarkoon is "unbound," and life itself is "uncertain."<sup>247</sup> In one pointed cluster, Rasinga's mother Montebesa castigates Samarkoon for his opposition to Rasinga taking a second wife, insisting that his thoughts have made him "unjust, ungenerous, unwise" – his jealousy has deprived him of the senses of justice, generosity, and wisdom that he had previously shown.<sup>248</sup> The process is one of evacuation, in which language creates and then dismantles. Such negation operates on the structural level of the plot as well: Samarkoon takes the Bride, then loses her; Rasinga changes his mind and negates his decision to have his wife and brother-in-law executed; the Bride herself becomes

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<sup>246</sup> Emphasis mine. I am indebted for my reading of the identify-formation in this passage to conversations with Professor Cynthia Chase of Cornell University.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid, 37, 59, 75, 83, 104, and 107.

unveiled only to be veiled again, then unveiled a second time; and, doubly, while Rasinga desires to negate the bonds of monogamous marriage, he is ultimately convinced to disavow this intention as well. What initially seems to be a simple vacillation on the part of the characters is actually, upon closer examination, a repeated movement toward disavowal and antithesis.

This linguistic negation is applied most consistently, however, to the physical body of the Bride. The threat posed by her unveiling is powerful: Rasinga's mother describes how

In its youthful charms  
He saw the virgin's unveil'd face. Alas!  
A sight so rare he could not see unmoved.  
Restless and troubled, like a stricken wretch  
Whom sorcery possesses, for a while  
He strove against his passion, but at length  
Nature gave way; and thou may'st guess what follows.<sup>249</sup>

The Bride's image is not only compelling, but irresistible, drawing both Rasinga and Samarkoon to virtual insanity in their drive to possess it. Rasinga is "stricken" with the sickness of infatuation, and simultaneously "possessed" by the face's otherworldly "sorcery." It is telling that the adjective "unveil'd" is immediately preceded by "virgin;" the terms work together to locate the threat of the Bride in her sexual desirability. In one sense, the sight of her face is the site of the greatest threat in the drama: it is capable of generating enormously powerful reactions from being seen, and all the play's action takes place because two men share one glimpse. For this reason it must be tightly controlled and circumscribed. Indeed, the play defines this threat most fully in its attempts to conceal it – because of the dangerous potential of the Bride's desirability, she must be carefully contained. Yet, crucially, it is only in the *disclosure*

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid, 16.

of her face that she creates the threat – the action is a negative one, not simply of revelation, but revelation following concealment; not only to reveal, but to “*unveil*.” She is threatening because of her hiddenness in relation to the male characters who attempt to possess her, and consequently only a meaningful entity insofar as she is undefined, vacated of the possibility of recognition or identification.

Placing a body onstage, especially a female one, had particular resonance within Baillie’s dramatic theory – and the lack thereof signals a distinct departure from the rest of her corpus. Baillie found fault with her contemporary dramatic environment, which had undergone a major shift during her lifetime: Romantic theaters had greatly increased in size since the mid-eighteenth century, so that after renovations in 1794 Drury Lane was seating over 3,600 spectators.<sup>250</sup> Such scale meant that only a few members of the audience could hope to see or hear the action onstage; the rest were relegated to distant seats with no possibility of engaging with what was taking place below. Actors who wished to be understood by the majority of their patrons had to shout and gesture wildly, abandoning any hope of subtlety. As a result, those productions that did not need to rely on fine distinctions or nuanced acting, such as farce or pantomime, came to dominate the theatrical landscape.<sup>251</sup> Spectacle began to be a major guiding force in productions, with stage managers competing with one another to display larger and more elaborate sets to maintain audience interest. Despite these efforts, however, many audience members nevertheless ignored what was happening onstage and engaged in gossip or business transactions, and it was not unusual for prostitutes to frequent the aisles in hopes of

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>250</sup> Peter Duthie, Introduction to his edition of Baillie’s *Plays on the Passions* (Ontario: Broadview, 2001). 37.



finding clients.<sup>252</sup> Rather than wishing to be educated or moved by a play, the majority of theatergoers began to expect to be entertained by antics onstage such as trained animals, the firing of canon, bawdy acting, or other escapades.<sup>253</sup> In lieu of subtly distinguished acting, audiences now came to desire theater that was loud, direct, and would guarantee diversion.<sup>254</sup>

Such a setting was antithetical to Baillie's dramatic project. In her 1798 Introductory Discourse to *A Series of Plays in Which it is Attempted to Delineate the Stronger Passions of the Mind*, she stresses how

In plays of this nature the passions must be depicted not only with their bold and prominent features, but also with those minute and delicate traits which distinguish them in an infant, growing, and repressed state; which are the most difficult of all to counterfeit, and one of which falsely imagined, will destroy the effect of a whole scene.<sup>255</sup>

No one in a grossly overfull, boisterous theater could have possibly followed such subtle developments. Rather, the necessity of making actors understood by the entire audience would preclude most fine distinctions, forcing the successful playwright whose works targeted the major theaters to adjust his or her writing accordingly. As Jeffrey Cox rightly points out, however, it is not that Baillie was prudishly hostile toward all forms of spectacle or grand performance; her contention was simply that such features tended to obscure the nuance she insisted was necessary for the faithful presentation of the material of her plays.<sup>256</sup> Indeed, in the Preface to her third volume

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid, 36-39.

<sup>252</sup> *The Revels History of Drama in English*, Vol. 6, ed. Clifford Leech and T.W. Craik (London: Methuen, 1975). 12-13; qtd in Duthie, 39-40.

<sup>253</sup> Duthie, 41.

<sup>254</sup> For a more detailed examination of the material conditions of the Romantic theater, see pages 14-22 of this project's second chapter.

<sup>255</sup> Joanna Baillie, *A Series of Plays in Which it is Attempted to Delineate the Stronger Passions of the Mind, Each Passion being the Subject of a Tragedy and a Comedy* (London: Cadeli, Jun. and W. Davies, 1798).

<sup>256</sup> Jeffrey Cox, "Staging Baillie" in *Joanna Baillie, Romantic Dramatist: Critical Essays*, ed. Thomas

of the *Plays on the Passions*, she states “Did our ears and eyes permit us to hear and see distinctly in a theater so large as to admit of chariots and horsemen, and all the ‘pomp and circumstance of war,’ I see no reason why we should reject them.”<sup>257</sup>

In order to allow the audience to be conscious of the nuance of her drama, Baillie advocated a fundamentally different kind of theatrical experience. As Peter Duthie observes, “she argued for intimate, well-lit theatres, so that even non-verbal spectacle could be more successful.”<sup>258</sup> Susan Bennett similarly asserts that Baillie “might be seen as the champion of an alternative theatre – one who persists in the imagination of a theatre that would work for the script and one who seeks a space that would afford community with the audience.”<sup>259</sup> In contrast to the raucous noise and disconnection of the prominent theaters, these smaller productions would focus on the actors themselves, creating a genuine “community” rather than a disparate gathering of people in the same room.

Given this focus on observation of others’ behavior, it is no surprise that Baillie chose drama as her primary medium, and was so insistent on the production of

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Crochunis (New York: Routledge, 2004). 146-167; found on 149-150. Cox also wryly observes that “in a sense, all she desires is an amplification system” (150).

<sup>257</sup> Joanna Baillie, *The Dramatic and Poetical Works of Joanna Baillie: Complete in One Volume* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1851). 231-232; qtd. in Cox, 150. In fact, Baillie’s 1804 *Constantine Paleologus* would itself feature large artillery onstage (see Susan Bennett, “Outing Joanna Baillie,” in *Women in British Romantic Theatre: Drama, Performance, and Society, 1790-1840*, ed. Catherine Burroughs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). 169).

<sup>258</sup> Duthie, 42. In an anecdote often cited by scholars to highlight Baillie’s insistence on the performability of her plays, Frances Anne Kemble describes the poet William Sotheby entering Baillie’s kitchen and finding her “up to the elbows in flour and paste.” She asked him to remove a small play-bill from her pocket “sent to her by some friend in the country” relating that *De Monfort* was to be performed there by “some obscure provincial company” and exclaiming “there, Sotheby, I am so happy! You see my plays can be acted somewhere!” (found in Frances Anne Kemble’s *Records of a Girlhood* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1879), 350; qtd. in Catherine Burroughs’ *Closet Stages: Joanna Baillie and the Theater Theory of British Romantic Women Writers* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 88-89). However, here Baillie’s enthusiasm seems to stem as much from the play’s performance in a small, country theater as from its simply being “acted.” Given that the narrative is only described by a second-hand witness, Frances Anne Kemble, and was not written until 1879, we may need to be skeptical as to its complete accuracy; still, its general tenor is in line with Baillie’s other statements strongly advocating the public performance of her plays.

her plays. Through depicting an individual responding to a variety of situations, staged drama allows the audience to gain the didactic benefit of his or her emotional experience without actually having to undergo it themselves. Describing the inhabitants of Ceylon as “people of strong passions,” and writing “It seems all the instruction which they receive is in a dramatic form; their Dramas are performed in the open air, and an assembly of ten thousand people will attend to them without wearying for nine or ten hours at a stretch [sic],” Baillie makes clear that she thought they would be an ideal audience, especially attuned to this form of empathic connection and keenly interested in watching others act out powerful scenes on stage.<sup>260</sup>

Since the audience is denied access to the bodily presence of the figure herself, to any meaningful referent by which to understand her, they can experience no “sympathetick curiosity” for the Bride, a central component in Baillie’s dramatic theory. Baillie outlines the concept in the Introductory Discourse of her *Plays on the Passions*, explaining that because of people’s similarity to one another, “nothing has become so much an object of man’s curiosity as man himself.”<sup>261</sup> We therefore watch those around us closely, attending not only to obvious manifestations of character, but to the minute details of actions and physiognomy: “even the smallest indications of an unquiet mind, the restless eye, the muttering lip, the half-checked exclamation, and the hasty start, will set our attention as anxiously upon the watch, as the first distant flashes of a gathering storm.”<sup>262</sup> People form their conceptions of character by this

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<sup>259</sup> Bennett, 173.

<sup>260</sup> Preface to *The Bride*, iv, and letter to Mrs. Hudson, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1827, in *Letters*, 2: 598. Baillie’s approval of the sheer scale (likely hyperbolic) of these supposed performances lends support to her statement, quoted above, that she found nothing wrong with large performances, as long as her characters could be seen and understood by all present.

<sup>261</sup> Joanna Baillie, Introductory Discourse to the *Plays on the Passions*, 2.

<sup>262</sup> Introductory Discourse, 10-11.

process of observation, yet the delineation takes place below the level of conscious thought.<sup>263</sup> Most importantly, it is through watching others that we come to define our own identities; by seeing someone experiencing pain, pleasure, love, envy, or hatred and forming an empathic connection with them, we feel their emotions and subject position, and in the process we become more like them.<sup>264</sup> While sympathetick curiosity therefore presents the inherent possibility of leading an individual to imitate immoral acts if he or she sees those around him commit them, it also has the potential to teach good behavior by example if the observer actively reflects on what is seen: “above all, to be well exercised in this study [reflection] will fit a man more particularly for the most important situations in life. He will prove for it the better Judge, the better Magistrate, the better Advocate...”<sup>265</sup> By watching others, we define our own actions, characters, and lives, for better or worse.

Paradoxically, then, the central character of *The Bride* and the central component of Baillie’s dramatic theory are rendered incompatible; without a stable identity with which to empathize, the audience cannot connect with the Bride, thus leaving her vulnerable to radical misreading. Not only is she evacuated of those linguistic signifiers that would constitute an identity, defined only in negative terms by her relationship to others and what she is not, but her very representation on stage is a kind of un-representation, one that exposes her only to strip away any power that she might have possessed. The effect of this absence of identification is to inhibit us from

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid, 15. In contrast to Baillie’s optimistic view of the benefits of curiosity, many writers in the period were more concerned by its negative potential. Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*, for example, with its damning central act of Caleb peering into Falkland’s forbidden chest, spawned multiple dramatic works which took the dangers of curiosity as their theme, such as George Colman the Younger’s *The Iron Chest: A Play in Three Acts* (1796) and *Blue-Beard; or, Female Curiosity!* (1798).

connecting with her – we are not able to form the bond that would allow us to empathize with her and learn from her actions by proxy in the way we do with characters in Baillie’s other plays. Lacking a stable identity of her own, she becomes a blank slate onto which others project their own desires. Consequently, when Samarkoon unveils the Bride’s face and argues that she should marry him instead of Rasinga, he interprets her silence as he wishes:

Thou smilest at this;  
And it doth please thy fancy; – yea, a tear  
Falls on that smiling cheek; yes, thou art mine.<sup>266</sup>

The perfectly opposed mixed signals – a smile and a tear – may indicate pleasure, displeasure, both, or something else entirely, but Samarkoon chillingly closes off the ambiguity and reads them only as he desires, as demonstrating the Bride’s complicity to his advances. He ascribes this external response to an internal motive, defining her thoughts with the bald declaration that “it doth please thy fancy.” There is no moral improvement here, no lesson learned; troublingly, the lack of sympathetick curiosity also potentially puts the audience in the same position as Samarkoon, overlaying their own beliefs and expectations onto the Bride rather than changing through the process of observation.

When the Bride finally does speak, however, for seven lines during the one scene in which she appears on stage, the dialogue only functions to reinforce her circumscription. Having forcefully taken her from Rasinga and brought her to his own castle, Samarkoon approaches the Bride to ask for her thoughts on marrying him instead of the older and already-married, although wealthier, chieftain. Responding to his plea that she speak to him, she replies

What can I say?  
I was the destined bride of the great Rasinga;  
My father told me so.<sup>267</sup>

Even her speech here is itself a question back to its addressee, a kind of unspeaking: it prevents us from encountering a wholly silent figure, one who bears mute testimony to the wrongs being inflicted upon her. Yet the fact that she has speech, only to have it appropriated and manipulated by the will of her future husband, serves to make even her own words serve his aims, subjecting her even more fully – there is no hidden potentiality of speech here, but the display that even speech is futile. She can do no more than defer to the words given to her by yet another man, her father, which ossify her “destiny” as a bride. Her only other statement to Samarkoon is an incredulous response to his reference to her “choice” of which man she will marry:

My choice! a modest virgin hath no choice.  
That I have seen you both; that both have seen  
My unveil'd face, alas! is my dishonour,  
Albeit most innocent of such exposure.<sup>268</sup>

The Bride disavows agency in her own “dishonour,” claiming that she is “innocent” of intentionality in the accidental exposure. When Samarkoon asks her to reveal her face to him, she “*gathers it [her veil] the closer*” to prevent him, but it falls off.<sup>269</sup>

Significantly, this action exposes her face not only to Samarkoon, but also to the audience in a staged performance, who now see what has spellbound the two men. At the same time that the power of her visage to influence those around her is being affirmed, its revelation to the audience serves to contain the very threat of that power – by removing the concealment on which her “mystery” had depended and rendering her

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<sup>266</sup> *The Bride*, 46.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid*, 43.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid*, 44-45, emphasis in text.

face visible to everyone onstage, it denies her that power any longer. Representation here produces no new capacity for the Bride, no change in state; instead, staging gender relations merely serves to fold them back into the systems of containment that had already kept them in check, revealing an inescapable catch-22 in which there is “no choice” for “a modest virgin.” As a result, soon after her exposure she capitulates to Samarkoon’s entreaties for her to marry him, signaling her resignation to a subjugated position.

That a figure can be marginalized through his or her very prominence in this way is a deeply paradoxical idea. Yet such a conception takes its cue, and may be made more sensible, from Romantic theatrical culture and its complex and fraught treatment of women. On one level, since the mid-eighteenth century women had played an ever-increasing role in the English theater, becoming actresses, stage managers, and playwrights in greater and greater numbers.<sup>270</sup> By 1800, Sarah Siddons could unhesitatingly be called the nation’s most prominent theatrical figure, and the major patent houses (Drury Lane, Covent Garden, and the Haymarket in the summer) regularly incorporated works by women playwrights into their repertoires. In many ways, women were enjoying a level of influence, prestige, and success in the theater

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<sup>270</sup> For more information on female actresses, see “Acting and Actors from Garrick to Kean” in *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre, 1730-1830*, ed. Jane Moody and Daniel O’Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and the “Glossary of Actors and Actresses” in *The Broadview Anthology of Romantic Drama* (New York: Broadview Press, 2003), 415-428. For a discussion of female stage managers, such as Mary Anne Yates and Frances Brooke, see Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women* (London and New York, Routledge, 1991), 50-52 (cited in Ellen Donkin, *Getting into the Act: Women Playwrights in London, 1776-1829* (London: Routledge, 1995), 194n) and also Davis’ “Gender, ‘gentlemanly capitalism’, and the wo-manager” in *The Economics of the British Stage, 1800-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For statistics on female playwrights, see Judith Phillips Stanton, “Statistical Profile of Women Writing in English from 1660-1800” in *Eighteenth Century Women and the Arts*, ed. Frederick M. Keener and Susan E. Lorsch (New York, Greenwood Press, 1988), 247ff (also cited in Donkin, 196n). While the numbers of these women were still low (Donkin estimates women playwrights as representing, on average, seven percent of all the dramatists in London between 1660 and 1800 (1)), they increased over time due to changing cultural standards of acceptable behavior for women and public acclimation to their works being performed.

greater than ever before. However, Ellen Donkin has demonstrated the ways in which such a system simultaneously suppressed and severely limited women actresses and playwrights, even as it advanced them. She shows how, since “women were becoming a permanent presence in the theatre, both as actresses *and* as playwrights,” it was necessary to find ways “to incorporate and regulate that presence, instead of attempting to dismiss or defeat it.”<sup>271</sup> She demonstrates that during the end of the eighteenth century, theater managers such as Richard Brinsley Sheridan, George Colman the Elder and his son, and Thomas Harris, following the example set by David Garrick, came to function as a “mentor, father, ‘*patronus*’” for their literary “daughters.”<sup>272</sup> These figures would promote promising female playwrights, assist with editing their works, and shepherd them through the process of getting their plays staged, yet all these benevolent acts were ultimately undertaken for the financial benefit of the managers themselves, who gained near-complete control over a pliable and otherwise-resourceless writer rendered financially dependent on her “father” in the process. Donkin shows that the only way women could respectably enter into the acutely public arena of playwrighting was by remaining under the “protection” of such a father figure – in effect being transferred from one form of domestic monitoring to another. To do otherwise would violate the carefully coded sets of cultural decorum on which a female playwright’s professional success depended.<sup>273</sup> Certainly, one way of ensuring “proper” behavior on the societal level of women who were increasingly breaking into the theatrical arena, and thus defuse the potential threat that they posed to the dominant male establishment, was to tightly regulate their work. It is worth

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<sup>271</sup> Ellen Donkin, *Getting into the Act: Women Playwrights in London, 1776-1829* (London: Routledge, 1995). 25, emphasis in text.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 and 25, emphasis in text.



quoting her in full on the way that such promotion paradoxically bound female playwrights:

They experienced widely different degrees of success, but the fact that they were produced at all meant that they had already negotiated a range of social prohibitions successfully before the fact of production. In fact, because the system was so tightly controlled, it is probably more accurate to think of these women as the *designated* survivors of the system, the ones chosen to succeed. Ironically, their presence – which ostensibly demonstrated the openness of the field to all comers – had the effect of showing that in spite of the open doors, only a small fraction would succeed anyway, reinforcing a general notion that women were inherently unsuited or unequal to the task. This kind of demonstration had the effect of preserving the status quo: even as it foregrounded the exceptions, it restated and underscored the principle.<sup>274</sup>

While Donkin describes this situation as having somewhat waned by the time Baillie wrote *The Bride* in 1828,<sup>275</sup> it was nevertheless a powerful component of the history and experience of women playwrights such as Baillie who had lived through the earlier era. Caught in a situation in which they could now gain access to a greater degree of financial security and professional esteem in the theatrical world, but with this freedom remaining contingent on the pleasure of one of the male managers of the major theaters, these women were put in a position in which they were circumscribed through their increased prominence – one not so different from that of the Bride herself. To make this claim is not to deny these women agency or to assert that their successes amount to nothing. Quite the contrary: it is to be deeply impressed with their accomplishments in the face of such seemingly insurmountable odds, and yet also to be, like them, disillusioned with what they found after overcoming these odds – a culture in which their position remained precarious, and in which their very success

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid, 13-18.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid, 3, emphasis in text. This passage also reveals Donkin's theoretical affinities with New Historicism's conception of subversion and containment.

was leveled against them.<sup>276</sup>

Baillie's own experience in the male-dominated English Romantic theater, and that of many of her contemporaries, mirrors the situation of the Bride: minimized, silenced, and wrenched from the stage; even their successes often fed back in to the ingrained regulatory systems in which they were enveloped. Spanning from 1762 to 1851, Baillie's life and career encompassed the Romantic period as a whole; as such, she had an especially profound vantage point from which to comment on the state of its theater. Her early dramatic works (especially the *Plays on the Passions* and its accompanying Introductory Discourse), while initially met with enormous praise, soon began to be harshly condemned when it was discovered that the previously anonymous author was actually a woman.<sup>277</sup> Although several of her plays were successfully staged and she was widely held to be one of the greatest dramatists of her age, she also met with enormous critical and popular resistance because of her gender, counting among her prominent and influential detractors Richard Brinsley Sheridan, successful playwright and manager of Drury Lane, and Francis Jeffrey, theater critic for the *Edinburgh Review*.<sup>278</sup> Additionally, despite the centrality within her dramatic theory of physically placing a body onstage and allowing the audience to see and hear the actors before them, her plays came to be publicly considered, to her "mortification," as better read than performed, creating a vicious cycle of rebuffed attempts at staging.<sup>279</sup> As this project's second chapter outlines, Baillie's earliest

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<sup>275</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>276</sup> Women playwrights who enjoyed financial success were sharply criticized for being "unladylike" and behaving "unnaturally" in seeking to support themselves from their works, even generating comparisons to prostitution, accusations never leveled at their male peers.

<sup>277</sup> Judith Bailey Slagle, *Joanna Baillie: A Literary Life* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002). 163-165.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid, 167-169 and 178-180.

<sup>279</sup> *Letters*, 1:283.

forays into writing for the stage had attempted to reform the theater from the inside; however, by 1811 she had expressed her deep and lasting disillusionment with the English theaters, promising that “my scheme therefore is to go on writing, but to reserve all the rest of my plays in manuscript to be produced by my heirs upon the Theatre when we shall have, (as we doubtless some time or other shall have) Theatres better fitted & better disposed to receive them.”<sup>280</sup> As Judith Bailey Slagle points out, “Baillie did not, of course, stop writing plays for publication, for volume three of *A Series of Plays and Dramas* would follow; but she now seemed resigned to her fate as a dramatist more read than performed, having been totally discouraged by the patriarchy of the London theater.”<sup>281</sup> Critics such as Greg Kucich have noted Baillie’s deep ambivalence about the possibility for true social reform for contemporary women, and Katherine Newey has described how “by the 1820s... the conditions for women writers had changed [from the perceived potentiality of early Romanticism]... After the revolutionary decades of the 1780s and 1790s, the almost-confident voice of female political subjectivity was diverted or directed against itself.”<sup>282</sup> Baillie would go on to publish a final multi-volume collection with new dramas in 1836, prefacing it with a hope that after her death they might be performed in some smaller theaters, but writing (with an almost audible sigh),

the present circumstances connected with our English Theatres are not encouraging for such an attempt; any promise of their soon becoming so is very doubtful; and I am induced to relinquish what was at one time my earnest wish. This being the case, to keep them longer

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid, 1:283.

<sup>281</sup> Slagle, 142.

<sup>282</sup> Gregory Kucich, “Baillie, Mitford, and the ‘Different Track’ of Women’s Historical Drama on the Romantic Stage” in *Women’s Romantic Theatre and Drama: History, Agency, and Performativity*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Keir Elam (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 21-42, citation on 40-41; and Katherine Newey, “Women and history on the Romantic stage: More, Yearsley, Burney, and Mitford” in *Women in British Romantic Theatre: Drama, Performance, and Society, 1790-1840*, ed. Catherine Burroughs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 79-101, citation on 93-94.

unpublished would serve no good purpose, and might afterwards give trouble to friends whom I would willingly spare. They are, therefore, now offered to the Public, with a diffident hope that they may be found deserving of some portion of its favour and indulgence.<sup>283</sup>

I do not mean in all this to paint an overly pessimistic view of one of the most powerful and productive playwrights in English history. Rather, I hope to show that even such an outstanding figure as Baillie was not above the Romantic theater's systematic subordination of women. Her position was singular only insofar as she was one of the most successful female playwrights of the period, among a tiny handful (also including Elizabeth Inchbald and Hannah Cowley) who were able to simultaneously earn a living and maintain respectability in the public eye. The fact remains that Baillie fared much better than the vast majority of her contemporaries in this arena, yet by the time of *The Bride*'s composition in 1828, she had still come to see the English stage as so antagonistic to her gender that attempts to engage with it were futile.<sup>284</sup>

In light of these conditions, I would like to suggest that *The Bride* displays a negative orientation, arguing for the *failure* of drama to produce social change for women by the end of the Romantic period. Instead of portraying a system in which women were given free opportunities to succeed, or even possibilities at the cost of an uphill battle, the plot of the drama replicates the workings of a theatrical culture in which even the successes of women playwrights largely functioned to underscore their dependent and secondary status – identical to the Bride's position within the play. Such a conception goes against the grain of traditional scholarship on Romantic

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<sup>283</sup> *Dramatic and Poetical Works*, 312; quoted in Slagle, 253.

<sup>284</sup> It is also telling that Baillie wrote her only true closet drama, *The Martyr*, during this period, in 1826.

drama, which has defined the medium as a site of potentiality for women writers.<sup>285</sup> Playwriting has been seen as providing women with a way to work against dominant male narratives in which they are subjugated or marginalized, allowing them to offer a different version of their place in history or society, with drama and the theater as alternative paths that can produce change on the social, cultural, philosophical, and even political levels which cannot otherwise take place.<sup>286</sup> But while this scholarship has demonstrated some of the ways in which the stage (or even unstaged closet plays) offered forms of recuperation and sites of potentiality for many women writers, I would like to suggest that Romantic drama by women also served as a *negative space* – in the dual sense of both representing a site of absence and of displaying the failure of these optimistic ideals and values, rendering them visible indirectly, by contrast. By eliding, omitting, and effacing the experiences of women from the stage, *The Bride* points to English society's inability, or unwillingness, to address its own issues in a way that directly staging these struggles cannot.<sup>287</sup> Absence thus becomes the central

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<sup>285</sup> That is, when these dramas have been conceptualized at all, which has only taken place sympathetically and in earnest since the 1980's. For Romantic women playwrights' troubled reception history, see, for example, Susan Bennett's "Outing Joanna Baillie" in *Women in British Romantic Theatre: Drama, Performance, and Society, 1790-1840*, ed. Catherine Burroughs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 161-177; Catherine Burroughs' "Uncloseting Women in British Romantic Theatre" in the same volume (1-22); Tracy Davis and Ellen Donkin's Introduction to *Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1-14; and pages 17-19 of this project's introduction.

<sup>286</sup> For recent examples, see Gregory Kucich's "Joanna Baillie and the re-staging of history and gender" in *Joanna Baillie, Romantic Dramatist: Critical Essays*, ed. Thomas Crochunis (New York: Routledge, 2004), 108-129; Anne Mellor's "Theater as the School of Virtue" in *Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England, 1780-1830* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2002), 39-68; and the volume *Women's Romantic Theatre and Drama: History, Agency, and Performativity*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Keir Elam (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010).

<sup>287</sup> Anthony Pollock locates a similar disillusionment within *The Spectator* and *The Tatler*, writing that "the ideal of spectatorial neutrality or of 'standing Neuter' is central to Addison and Steele's cultural project. While previous readings emphasize Addison and Steele's desire to reform contrary energies in early eighteenth-century England, I argue that the papers *stage the failure* of their public engagement in order to enable a privately-conducted neutralization (in the sense of 'render[ing] ineffective') of their audience's impulse to make ethics public... The most ideologically efficacious aspect of the spectatorial project turns out to be its containment of readers' political judgment about public antagonisms by transforming that judgment into a matter of private aesthetic response" (Anthony Pollock, "Neutering

mode of expression for that which cannot be presented otherwise; it is the place where one can circumvent the impossible bind wrought by representation. Indeed, the play performatively displays its removal from the English venue precisely for this purpose; rather than representing an admission of defeat, *The Bride*'s relocation constitutes a way out of the dilemma in which even representation could function as a form of suppression: it removes itself from the English theater and language altogether, displacing its staging to the distant locale and language of Sri Lanka.<sup>288</sup> The play would not even be performed in English, but translated into Sri Lankan by an intermediary. Relocating *The Bride* in this way allowed Baillie to sidestep the forces she found so oppositional in England, and simultaneously enabled the play to still be physically enacted, preserving the potential for empathic connection through sympathetick curiosity. Simultaneously, by later presenting the play to the English public by publishing it in her 1851 *Dramatic and Poetical Works*, Baillie was able to showcase for the country the play's displaced staging, reflecting England's own rejection back upon itself for all to see.

Even the play's representation of Sri Lanka serves as a performance directed toward those in England. Although set against the backdrop of England's recent invasion of the island, *The Bride* entirely omits references to its colonization or the

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Addison and Steele: Aesthetic Failure and the Spectatorial Public Sphere," *English Literary History* 74:3 (2007): 704-734; 709 and 727, emphasis mine). However, Baillie's project in *The Bride* differs from Addison and Steele's insofar as she is not content to simply observe and passively note society's ills; instead, the play actively removes the victims of this disenfranchisement from its staging, thus making the audience aware of the spaces they leave behind.

<sup>288</sup> Baillie may have found a model for sending plays to locations more favorable for reception in the earlier success of her drama *The Family Legend* in Scotland, which "opened at the Edinburgh Theatre on 29 January 1810 to a packed house and scored such a tremendous success for three weeks that it was immediately followed by a revival of *De Monfort* on February 20 and yet another run of the play in March" (Slagle, 133).

resulting civil war.<sup>289</sup> Britain had wrested the colony from the Dutch in 1796, who had in turn taken it from the Portuguese in 1656. The invasion sparked a great deal of public interest in the country in England, leading to the publication of several travel narratives describing the island by those who had taken part in the conquest, such as Robert Percival's 1803 *An Account of the Island of Ceylon* and James Cordiner's 1807 *A Description of Ceylon*.<sup>290</sup> Each follows the same pattern, presenting detailed accounts of the history and geography of the island, the character of its inhabitants, and their customs and religion, and ends with a personal narrative of the writer's travels. The only edition of Baillie's letters, edited by Judith Bailey Slagle, describes the playwright researching the history and culture of the island for background information in writing *The Bride* by "carefully looking over Dr. Dray's account of Ceylon for something to work upon," yet there do not seem to be any accounts of the island written by someone of that name.<sup>291</sup> However, Dorothy McMillan has recently pointed out that there is a mistranscription in Slagle's edition, and that the actual manuscript reads "Davy" instead of "Dray."<sup>292</sup> This citation identifies the 1821 *An Account of the Interior of Ceylon*, written by the traveling physician and soldier Dr.

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<sup>289</sup> For a discussion of these colonialist themes, see Christine Colón, "Christianity and Colonial Discourse in Joanna Baillie's *The Bride*," *Renascence* 54.3 (2002): 163-176. I appreciate Colón's attention to the ways in which Baillie's Christianity intersects with the play's imperialism, and the degree to which her views of religion can represent a leveling force that equalizes all people; however, it seems that ultimately the European Christian physician Juan De Creda, who appears in the play as a *deus ex machina* to correct the errors of the native Sri Lankans, is superior because he is a white European male, as much or more than due to his Christianity. It is also difficult to ignore Baillie's own position as a kind of De Creda figure, hoping to "educate" the natives by introducing them to a more "advanced" code of conduct, and the configuration which places her own text as a pseudo-Bible that the Europeans have brought to enlighten the natives. Colón distressingly overlooks these issues entirely in her construction of a more sympathetic reading that, to my mind, is not borne out by the text of the play.

<sup>290</sup> Robert Percival, *An Account of the Island of Ceylon, Containing its History, Geography, Natural History, with the Manners and Customs of its Various Inhabitants* (1803; reprint, Sri Lanka: Tisara Press, 1975), and James Cordiner, *A Description of Ceylon, Containing an Account of the Country, Inhabitants, and Natural Productions* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1807).

<sup>291</sup> *Letters*, 2:603.

John Davy, as the work to which Baillie refers.<sup>293</sup> *The Bride* draws much from this source text, including references to “Boohdoo rais,” the island god Kattragam, and the characters of Samar and Eheylapola (“Ehleypoolie” in the play).<sup>294</sup>

Yet, as McMillan demonstrates, Baillie’s use of Davy’s text is curiously loose; for example, despite the play’s emphasis on the threat of polygamy, the *Account* states explicitly that polyandry is the dominant form of marriage on the island, and that polygamy is almost unheard of.<sup>295</sup> Similarly, Eheylapola is transformed from a revolutionary leader in Davy’s narrative to a comically prolix servant in the play. The only faithful portrayal seems to be the description of Samar, whom Baillie describes exactly as he appears in the *Account*: the son of a woman condemned to death, he comes forward and bravely insists that he will die alongside of her, teaching his family courage.<sup>296</sup> Even here, however, there are drastic changes: the child dies in Davy’s *Account*, and is, in fact, Eheylapola’s son, whereas in *The Bride* he lives and is Rasinga’s. As McMillan writes, “it is true that Baillie took the trouble to learn something about Ceylon; it is also true that she rejected most of what was distinctive about Singalese culture.”<sup>297</sup> Baillie does not seem to have read or drawn from the content of other contemporary narratives, such as those written by Percival and

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<sup>292</sup> Dorothy McMillan, “Joanna Baillie’s *The Bride* and John Davy’s *Account of Ceylon*,” *Notes and Queries* 56:3 (2009): 393-394.

<sup>293</sup> John Davy, *An Account of the Interior of Ceylon and of its Inhabitants and Travels in that Island* (1821; reprint, Sri Lanka: Tisara Press, 1969). Perhaps Baillie’s connection to a medical family (her brother was Matthew Baillie, physician-extraordinary to King George III, and her uncles were the prominent physicians William and John Hunter) attracted her specifically to this work, written by a physician who was also the younger brother of the eminent chemist Sir Humphry Davy; John Davy may have also been part of Baillie’s inspiration for making the itinerant Juan De Creda a physician.

<sup>294</sup> McMillan, 393.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, 394.

<sup>296</sup> Davy, 240.

<sup>297</sup> McMillan, 394. While it is tempting to therefore simply dismiss Baillie as stubbornly ignoring the facts about the country in favor of producing her own idealized version, we might also read the play as presenting an internally consistent program that combines colonial expansion with religious ideology –



Cordiner, about the island at all,<sup>298</sup> and the frustration she expresses in her letter to Margaret Holford Hodson about the paucity of information that she has been able to find about the country is odd given their wide popularity; had she earnestly desired to find material from other narratives, she almost certainly could have done so.<sup>299</sup> The only potential exception to this omission occurs in a brief passage from Cordiner's *Description*, in which he writes about seeing a long "Cingalese play" which was a plotless collection of tumblers, dancers, and pantomime animals.<sup>300</sup> While Baillie does mention the Sri Lankan fondness for dramas in her Preface to the play, there is no further overlap; for example, Cordiner includes nothing to suggest that an "assembly of ten thousand people will attend to them [plays] without wearying for nine or ten hours at a stretch [sic]" as Baillie asserts.<sup>301</sup> Overall, the impression is that Baillie was more interested in the English audience of the play, and their expectations, than the Sri Lankan one. Indeed, while the play was nominally written only for the stage, this begs the question of why it is preceded by a Preface (which would traditionally be read, instead of, for example, a prologue voiced by one of the actors or characters),

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with Baillie as attempting to "convert" the cultural apparatuses of the native population into ones that she found religiously acceptable. That said, to recognize this interpretation is in no way to condone it.

<sup>298</sup> Based on my reading of these narratives and checking them against *The Bride*, I have been unable to find any connections that are of the same extent as Baillie's use of Davy's *Account*, from which she draws direct quotes and character and place names. While some events, such as the invocation of Katragam, are included in both *The Bride* and these other texts, they are also included in the *Account*, meaning that Baillie need only have read that single text to account for their presence in the play.

<sup>299</sup> *Letters*, 2:603. Percival's volume, for example, went through four editions in just two years, including two in French and German.

<sup>300</sup> Cordiner, 114-117.

<sup>301</sup> *Letters*, 2:598. This description by Baillie is tantalizing, since it is unclear where she draws it from, indicating that she may have had some other source for her information about the country, a suggestion supported by her mention that Johnston would be "furnishing me with a story characteristic of their [the Sri Lankans'] own manner &c to work upon" (*Letters*, 2:597-598). A passage mentioning "a detachment under the command of Captain (now Lieutenant-Colonel) Johnston," along with an accompanying footnote referencing "Johnston's 'Narrative,' &c." in Davy's *Account* (235-236), proves to be a red herring, referring instead to Major Arthur Johnston's *Narrative of the Operations of a Detachment in an Expedition to Candy, in the Island of Ceylon, in the Year 1804* (London: C. and R. Baldwin, 1810), which is primarily a discussion of the movements of English military units during their

and why this Preface shifts from speaking directly to the native Sri Lankans to describing them to an unnamed third party.<sup>302</sup> It seems rather that the piece as a whole functions primarily as a performance, a display for those back home.

Yet the play's conclusion draws into question the viability even of such outwardly directed displays, the ability of the drama to have an impact at all. It closes with Rasinga delivering a message of hope for the future:

We've striven stoutly with a fearful storm,  
But, thanks to good De Creda, it is past;  
And all the brighter shall our sky appear,  
For that the clouds which have obscured its face,  
Were of a denseness dark and terrible.<sup>303</sup>

Just as the "face" of the sky that was "obscured" has been revealed, the play has "revealed" to the audience the supremacy of Christianity as a moral code, liberating the natives from the darkness of ignorance; in so doing, the passage sets up a binary between darkness/ignorance/past and brightness/knowledge/future. Such a perspective is closely aligned with the Enlightenment project, and its view that rationality, reason, and unveiling the truth will necessarily advance and improve society. However, the Bride's position within the text lays bare the fissures in this teleological model, and draws into question the very axioms of the system of thought that had promised social progress, but within which Romantic women, of the theater especially, had found little. Instead of being aligned with progress, exposure for her (both in the dramaturgy and in potential performance) only leads to different forms of

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campaign in the country. Perhaps Alexander Johnston sent Baillie information about the island in an as-yet undiscovered letter?

<sup>302</sup> For example, halfway through the Preface, after discussing the lifestyles and customs of the native Sri Lankans (remarks clearly addressed to an English audience), Baillie pivots and asks that the reader "now let me address a few words to those whom I shall never see... those for whose especial use the following Drama was written" (vii-viii).

<sup>303</sup> *The Bride*, 107-108.

subjugation and containment.<sup>304</sup> When the play's revelation occurs on the level of the body, and it is the Bride's "face" that is no longer "obscured," it fails to deliver its promised new day. As Judith Bailey Slagle writes, "although the ending [of *The Bride*] is happy enough for most of the characters, the bride clearly has gained nothing but a younger, single man in this bargain – no power of refusal, no equality."<sup>305</sup> Rather than arguing that the position of women is improved by relentlessly uncovering and exposing them, *The Bride* asserts that doing so actually does nothing for the women themselves, instead leaving them in the same position as before, still lacking agency, still unable to control their own fate. The resulting double bind, in which concealment and exposure both result in the oppression of women, reveals a profound disillusionment with the possibility for advancement; if one cannot even alter social defects by exposing them, what hope is there for change?

I would suggest that hope for change does not, in fact, lie within the text of *The Bride* itself, but rather outside of it. In her letters, Baillie describes the play as "a little cock-boat to be launched upon a wide ocean, bound on a distant voyage; I hope it will not prove a castaway."<sup>306</sup> As a "cock-boat," a small craft attached to a larger ship and usually used only for short journeys, the play is symbolically separated from the broader English tradition, set off on its own on a divergent course.<sup>307</sup> By displacing the drama to Sri Lanka, "launching" it like a ship out of England in this way, Baillie presents the fantasy of an escape from the confines of her country to an environment

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<sup>304</sup> Perhaps in some sense, then, the play also undermines the colonial narrative of relentless expansion and progress in which it participates, which is also closely bound up in the Enlightenment project. In doing so, it may be expressing a kind of sympathy with its Sri Lankan audience, which, like the Bride, is defined by its English colonizers rather than being seen or known on its own terms.

<sup>305</sup> Slagle, 269.

<sup>306</sup> In *Further Letters of Joanna Baillie*, ed. Thomas McLean (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010), 129.

where there is fresh hope for a reformed theater, capable of imbuing its attentive audience with moral lessons, and possibly even for the advancement for women. By not having her play staged, by sending it off, Baillie is able to show the inability of the drama to have an impact in her own country, an action that may, in itself, expose what a staged play on its own cannot. *The Bride* thus becomes itself a kind of negative theatrical space, one that paradoxically stages how England had become an impossible environment for the theater and for social change for women, putting the situation on display in a way that a traditionally staged play would be unable to do. The play may therefore serve as a model for how drama as a genre engages with such impossible conditions: in the face of the brute reality of the failure of past attempts at representation, a simple portrayal becomes inadequate, and absence paradoxically becomes the only tenable venue of display.

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<sup>307</sup> “cock-boat, *n.*” *OED Online*. December 2011. Oxford University Press.

### **Coda: A Whisper of Soft Winds**

At a recent American Comparative Literature Association annual meeting in Toronto (April, 2013), I chaired a panel on the subject of “Dead Signals: Textual Authority and the Negation of Meaning.” While the conference theme as a whole was “Global Positioning Systems” and it addressed the way that literature situates us in relation to the world, this panel was composed of papers arguing instead that literature can often discomfit, disorient, or deceive us, sometimes even outright lying to our face. Papers on topics ranging from Orhan Pamuk and *Memento* to Toni Morrison and *The Waves* presented such literature as engaging in a process of undoing conventional modes of sense-making, of foregrounding the ways in which texts often stage the failure of normative readings. During our discussion, we noted the wide-ranging desire to ferret out stable meanings within texts which deny them, whether this came from *Blackwood’s* reviewers commenting on the self-referentiality of John Neil during the nineteenth century, classroom discussions of *The Crying of Lot 49*, or obsessive members of internet forums arguing that their interpretation of *2001: A Space Odyssey* was not only correct, but the only plausible explanation for the events on the screen. However, all the participants agreed that, far from simply being a postmodern turn, such attention to textual negation shed light on the implicit assumptions with which we approach literature as readers, our expectations for finding meaning within readily apparent avenues, and the tendency, even among critics, to subject works which do not conform to such standards to interpretive heuristics which are alien to them, and which they in fact actively resist.

It is my hope that this dissertation has shed light on how women playwrights of

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<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/35372?redirectedFrom=cock%20boat> (accessed July 8, 2011).

the Romantic period produced works which “mean” in these non-traditional schemas, and that the project has offered strategies for reading them in ways that attend to this alternative path toward sense-making. While employing negative spaces, and staging, or themselves performing, removal from the stage, was a viable strategy for these figures to give voice to their fraught social positions, however, it also virtually assured their relegation to misinterpretation or to being perceived as somehow deficient, inarticulate, or even complicit within their own subjugation in their own time, and their elision from the literary canon in ours. I hope that this project will begin to remedy this situation, giving us new lenses through which to read such works from the Romantic period that better attend to the ways in which these figures employed alternative epistemological modes in their writings.

Recently, critical works have begun to emerge which employ the hermeneutic strategies I am advocating. A. Reeve Parker’s *Romantic Tragedies: The Dark Employments of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley* (2011) is an example of such attention to the negative spaces within dramatic texts.<sup>308</sup> In his discussion of *The Borderers* in particular, Parker draws attention to the ways in which unpublished manuscripts, revised titles, textual variants, and alternative versions are actually central aspects of the final thematic product of the text of the play, which cannot adequately be read without considering these “absent” elements. Outside of the field of Romantic literature, Patrick Duggan’s *Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance* (2012) suggests that drama, especially tragedy, offers a potential site for working out trauma’s wounds and offering solutions for otherwise-impossible problems that belie traditional dramatic representation: “trauma-tragedy is

positioned as a means by which society can engage in attempting to understand, contextualize and bear witness to its own social dramas and traumas.”<sup>309</sup> Thus, Duggan’s work has deep affinities with this study’s emphasis on the ability of drama to at once frame, but also intervene, within contemporary debates as no other medium can.

It is my hope that this study will be drawn on by scholars in fields such as gender studies, theater history, and Romantic literature as a whole. I urge that we re-examine our approach to these fields, focusing more carefully on those figures and elements, in works by women especially, that do *not* appear in direct discourse or onstage, but only manifest in allusion, elision, and as conspicuous voids. By attending to these previously marginalized features, this project reorients our view of works from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the present, expanding reading practices to reflect women writers’ reconfiguration of the stage’s positive capacities to the potentiality of negative ones.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this project has a social component, and I hope that it will make an impact in this realm most of all. It seeks to contribute to the rapidly growing critical discourse demanding that these doubly non-canonical figures, women who wrote drama, have a more central place within contemporary scholarship, as studying them significantly reworks our understanding of the Romantic period and the history of drama and gender studies more broadly. Nearly all of critical conversations about drama by women from this period, however, have framed it primarily in utilitarian terms: critics employ these texts in order to make claims about

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<sup>308</sup> A. Reeve Parker, *Romantic Tragedies: The Dark Employments of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

the period or drama in general; they have approached it not as an aesthetic object, but as a means to an end. While this perspective is certainly correct, useful, and in some sense inescapable, I hope that this project has additionally presented Romantic drama by women in terms of the pleasure it gives, the sheer delight and exuberance that this astounding literature displays. Consider, for example, these exquisite lines from *The Siege of Valencia*:

Oh! that ere my early grave  
Shuts out the sunbeam, I might hear one peal  
Of the Castilian trumpet, ringing forth  
Beneath my father's banner! – In that sound  
Were life to you, sweet brothers! – But for me –  
Come on – our tasks await us. They who know  
Their hours are number'd out, have little time  
To give the vague and slumberous languor way,  
Which doth steal o'er them in the breath of flowers,  
And whisper of soft winds.<sup>310</sup>

Any movement to take these figures seriously as objects of rigorous study must finally be grounded in the conviction that they are worth reading, in both critical and aesthetic terms – lines such as these should dispel any doubts as to their fulfilling either of these criteria. Without doubt, women playwrights of the Romantic period used drama as a way of inserting themselves into contemporary debates about philosophy, politics, art, history, and gender; however, they also wrote it to be enjoyed by a theatrical or readerly audience, to be set in motion by engaged actors and actresses who would bring their narratives to life. While they used absence as a way of dramatizing their struggles within a patriarchal society, they also succeeded in making the works that did so engaging and lasting pieces of entertainment in the process – certainly no mean

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<sup>309</sup> Patrick Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012). 8.

<sup>310</sup> Felicia Hemans, *The Siege of Valencia*, ed. Susan Wolfson and Elizabeth Fay (New York: Broadview, 2002). 147.



feat. Remembering this helps us to better appreciate the pure power and aesthetic beauty of these texts, their vitality and vigor, which alone ensures that more and more people will read, study, and stage them – cultivating this appreciation and passing it on is perhaps the greatest service to their remarkable authors that this project can offer.

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